

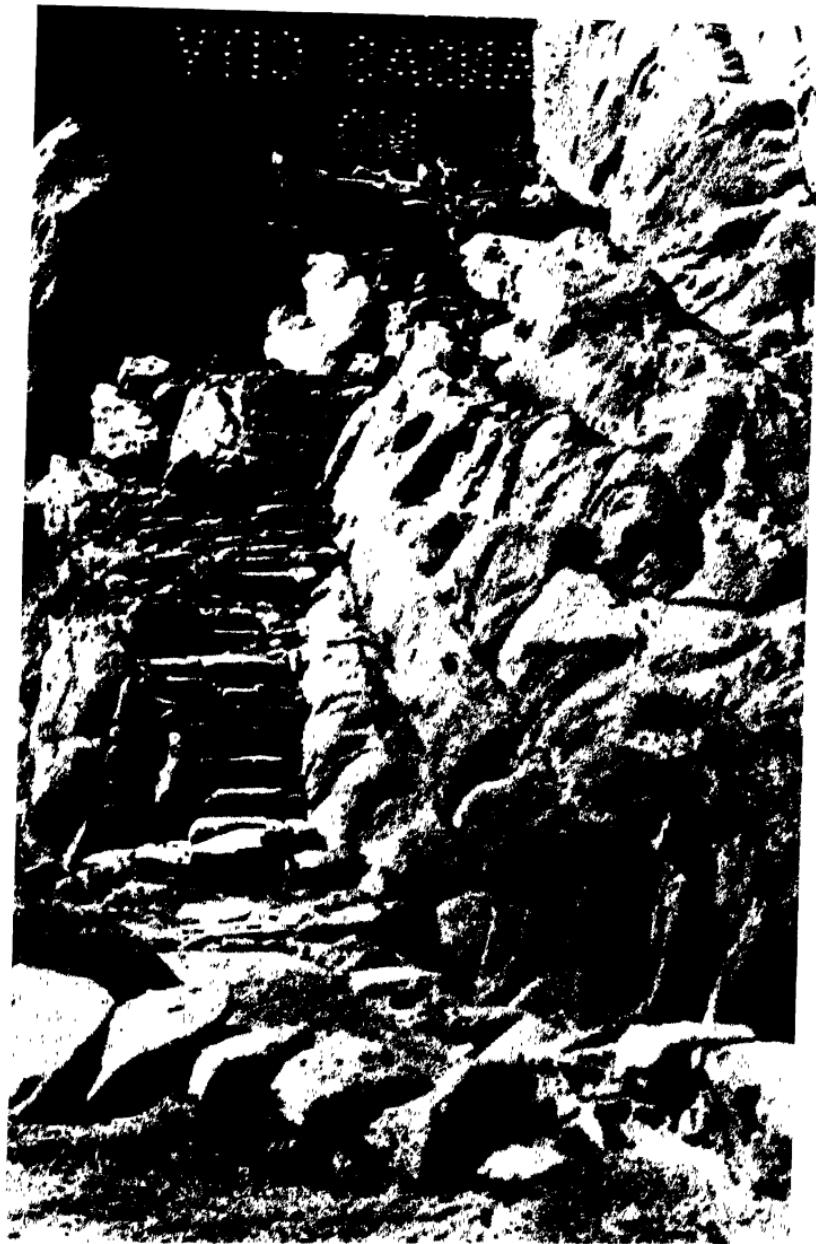
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YUAN DAWU



STAIRWAY UP THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

IN THE STEPS OF MOSES THE LAWGIVER

By
LOUIS GOLDING

NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1938

FOR
RICHARD BLAKER
NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE
QUEEN'S COLLEGE

FOREWORD

I MET Colonel Smith in the dining-room of the Bel Air Hotel in Suez. I am more grateful to him than I had the opportunity of acknowledging at the time. For when my publishers asked me to write a foreword, explaining the spirit which animated the living and writing of this book, I realized that Colonel Smith had elicited from me the very thing they were asking for. I beg the reader's permission, therefore, to quote by way of foreword two or three pages from the fifth chapter, wherein my tête-à-tête with the Colonel is reported in extenso. I might have paraphrased the passages in question, but I could not have stated more exactly how I felt, and feel, about my journey.

“What have you found out?” said the Colonel.

“Found out?” I repeated. “About what?”

The Colonel slapped the Cairo paper with the back of his hand.
“About this? This Exodus business? Which way did Moses and the other fellers go? How did they do it?”

“You mean which way they went?” I said a little foolishly. I did not quite know what he was after.

“Of course! Which way they went!” There was a note of impatience in his voice.

“Well, I suppose along the Wadi Tumilat to somewhere just north of Lake Timsah. Is that what you mean, sir?” I asked anxiously.

My answers to date had not at all excited him. “Go on! Go on!”

“And then they crossed the Red Sea somewhere. We took it somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Bitter Lakes!”

The butt of the cigar glowered red and black at us, like an inflamed eye with grit in it, opening and shutting.

“And then——” I went on. I didn’t quite know where all this was leading to.

But the Colonel did.

"And then you go down to Ayun Musa. That's Marah. And then you go along the Wadi Gharandel. That's Elim."

"Yes, yes," I said. "You seem to have made a deep study of the Exodus, sir?" Yet I felt a little anxious, somehow.

"And then of course you go to Gebel Musa. That's your Mount Sinai, isn't it?"

Was I, or was I not, mistaken? The man was sneering at me. Yes, definitely, he was sneering at me. But what was wrong about taking Mount Sinai as Mount Sinai? A great many millions of people have been doing it for nearly two thousand years.

"Yes, we go to Mount Sinai. And then——"

"But good heavens, man!" the Colonel suddenly exploded. "That's all been done before! Every inch of it! Mount Sinai! Everybody's Mount Sinai!"

"Yes, sir!" I hastened. "That's rather the point of it, in a way."

"But what original ideas have you on the subject? Don't you see? Mustn't write a book like this without having original ideas!"

"What sort do you mean, sir? If I may ask?"

"Oh no, young man, no! Must find your original ideas for yourself!"

"But that's not quite the way we approached it, if I may say so."

"What d'you mean?"

"It was the tradition that most interested us. We feel the tradition's as likely to be true as anything that can be found out at this date. And, in any case, it has a real truth of its own, just because it is the tradition." I was not finding all this too easy. My neck was getting a little hot.

"And you see, sir," Lucas helped me out. "We went through the alternative routes. And they're all comparatively dull. The traditional route is so beautiful and so exciting."

"You still haven't got the point," said the Colonel implacably. "It's not a matter of alternative routes. It's a matter of an original route."

I felt we were at cross-purposes. I would try to approach his point of view.

"Of course," I admitted, "we're doing our best to check up on the

scholars in detail. Not that we pretend to be scholars. Far from it. But now and again you get the impression, for instance, that a scholar is trying to build up a new theory, not because he really believes in it, but merely because he wants to upset the theory of the man in front of him."

"Darn good thing!" the Colonel endorsed. "Makes books worth writing."

"And another thing. When you actually get on the spot, you sometimes realize for the first time the fellow's never been there. And never hinted that he's never been there, either."

"Who?"

"I mean the scholar, the one who's put out such a clever theory about such-and-such a place."

"A clever theory's better than a foolish theory," said the Colonel sternly. "And a darn sight better than no theory at all!"

I let out a sudden sharp breath. Something had died inside me. I was incapable of uttering another word.

Somewhat similarly, I find myself incapable of writing any other foreword.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>Facing page</i>
	<i>Endpapers</i>
	<i>Frontispiece</i>
PLAN OF THE JOURNEY	3
STAIRWAY UP THE HOLY MOUNTAIN	19
PHARAOH OF THE OPPRESSION	34
THE VIRGIN'S TREE	51
FIELD OF ZOAN	66
THANK-OFFERING	83
GATHERING OF THE HOST	98
SCHOOL IN GOSHEH	115
WEDDING GUESTS	130
BELLES OF THE CIRCUS	147
WATERS OF MARAH	162
STALEMATE IN ELIM	179
MANNA-BEARING TREE	194
WRITINGS IN WADI MOKATTEB	211
THE ROCK OF THE STRIKING	226
OASIS IN FEIRAN	243
MONK IN HIS GARDEN	258
IN THE HOLLOW OF SINAI	275
(<i>By courtesy of Mrs. D. J. Wallace</i>)	
INTERLUDE	290
THE BURNING BUSH	307
(<i>By courtesy of Mrs. D. J. Wallace</i>)	
THE SHEIKH OF THE CONVENT SLAVES	322
THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LAW	338
FOOTPRINT OF MOHAMMED'S CAMEL	344
VIEW FROM THE HOLY MOUNTAIN	(By courtesy of A. G. Froeland)

(The photographs were taken by the author, except in the cases otherwise listed.)

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

THE voice came to me sepulchrally along the telephone-wire, like a voice out of a sarcophagus in the Valley of Tombs.

“ Will you go to the East this year and follow in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver? ”

I paused. I had been travelling so much these last few years. I was intending to stay at home. It seemed I might at last have the leisure to do certain things I had long wanted to do. I wanted to get the books right; they were all over the place. I wanted to read Fielding; all Fielding. I wanted to see to my strip of lawn, and go to the island off Northumberland, long promised, still unvisited.

I had a sudden vision of criss-cross masts of Nile feluccas making a net in which the bright stars floundered like fish, and a small girl went down to the rushes and placed a cradle there. I heard a dry wind sifting the sands in a wadi in Sinai between porphyry crags, and it was the voice of a great multitude that murmured: “ Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt for nought; the cucumbers, and the melons and the leeks.” I saw a mountain smoking, and a people standing far off, and an old man, unafraid and alone, drawing near to the thick darkness where God was.

Then abruptly my mind turned, like the beam of a lighthouse lantern, but it did not achieve the full circuit between Sinai and Northumberland. The light I saw by was six candles in six brass candlesticks that lit up the kitchen of the house I was born in, in Doomington, a dark industrial city in the North of England. The incandescent gas had not yet been turned off and the burner talked to itself like the water-tap in the scullery adjoining. There was another sound

hardly louder than these. That was the voice of my father, who sat in his favourite chair, under the cupboard where the holy books were kept. On the wall beside him was a chart framed in maple-wood, on which was traced a thick red line, the line of the forty-years' wandering of Moses and the Israelites. It began in the House of Bondage, zigzagged in sharp angles about the Peninsula of Sinai and ended at length on the border of the Promised Land. It was the Sabbath eve. My mother had cleared the dinner-things away. The six candles stood on the white table-cloth, each rising like a folded lily from its own pool of light. My father was telling us tales out of the Jewish folklore in the Talmud, as he would often do on the Sabbath eve after dinner. That night it was tales of Moses he was telling us, of the wonders that were wrought at the court of Pharaoh, and of the crossing of the Red Sea, when the waters became hard and transparent as crystal, and twelve paths were carved there, one for each one of the tribes. My father turned to the chart on the wall beside him and told tales of the wanderings that followed, tracing the journeys with the point of a rough skewer. The old Irishwoman who came in on Friday evenings to turn out the gas and rake out the embers of the fire, shuffled in as he spoke, but no-one noticed she was there. As for myself, I sat gaping, and with shining eyes, on the metal stool in the hearth. There were times when my father told these tales and the Red Sea seemed not much further than the black Irwell at the bottom of the street, and Sinai loomed up above the brick-crofts round the corner. But mostly those places seemed further and more improbable than the star Vega, or the star Aldebaran.

It was ghostly, therefore, for a voice to come towards me along the telephone-wire and ask me: "Will you go East this year and follow in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver?"

"Are you still there?" I said, into the Pharaonic ear of the instrument.

"I am still here," a patient voice replied.

"I was going to read Fielding . . . and there's that strip

PHARAOH OR THE OPPRESSION



of lawn," I began. But even as I spoke, a wind blew from the desert, scattering the pages, and the Red Sea piled its waves over my strip of lawn. "But I would rather go where you say, if you will arrange it."

It was arranged that I should go. It was further arranged that Lucas and Jim should go with me. Lucas was to organize, Jim was to be the strong man. I was to write this book.

The journey will begin, I told myself, at the place where Moses was born. From there we will follow in his steps, as the Book indicates, and where the Book is obscure, we will be guided by the scholars. Where the scholars are divided amongst themselves—a state of things sometimes to be met with—we will betake ourselves to legend, where so frequently a hard core of truth is preserved, which the scholars often corroborate, but only late in the day and very out of breath.

Where was Moses born, then? We remembered that he was born in Egypt, doubtless somewhere on the Nile, for Egypt and the Nile are in an effective sense the same thing. We went to the Book and studied it hard and long to see if it contained more specific information, but we could find none. He was born on the Nile or somewhere very close to it, for we are informed that his mother "took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and pitch; and she put the child therein, and laid it in the flags by the river's brink." She can have dared to go no more than a short distance with him, for Pharaoh had enjoined that every son born to the women of Israel should be cast into the river. If it had been more than a short distance, the chances of discovery would have been vastly increased, and it would not have been easy to explain what that water-tight ark of bulrushes was for.

The same conclusion emerges from the next episode in the account; for when Pharaoh's daughter found the ark among the flags and saw the child and had compassion on

him, the child's sister, who was standing afar off, cried: "Shall I go and call thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother." The mother may have been hovering in the fields in the vicinity, but it is quite as likely she was watching events from the door-post of her husband's house.

Moses was born on the Nile, then. But where on the Nile? The Nile is a very long river, as His Eminence the Archbishop of the Sinai Convent was to inform us, a little humorously, some time later.

We will go to the scholars, we said, the Egyptologists. For they will tell us which Pharaoh it was that oppressed the people of Moses; they will tell us where his palace was, and that will be near the place where Moses was born; for this same daughter, who found the small boy, was in the habit of going down each morning from her father's palace to bathe, and it stands to reason she would not go far.

But we soon realized that if we were to rely on the Egyptologists, we would never begin our journey at all. For when they accepted the Bible narrative as having some relation to historic fact, they could not decide which Pharaoh it might have been; and if they agreed on that, they did not agree on the name of the city he might have dwelt in. And quite often they said that Moses was as mythical a figure as Ulysses, and that the story of the Exodus had as much "historicity" (to use one of their favourite words) as the Siege of Troy. They said that in all their burrowings and excavatings, they had not come across a single stone on which a reference to either Moses or the Exodus had been carved. Therefore neither the one nor the other could have been.

But for my own part, I would not have that, partly because it is an instinctive belief of my blood that Moses is as historic a personage as Napoleon, and my ancestors for a hundred generations have told the tale of their deliverance by him,

each Passover eve as it came round. To my more rational self it did not seem an insuperable difficulty that the stones made no mention of Moses or Exodus. Whatever the actual truth of the episode was, it was clear that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had had a thin time, not the sort of time they would like to crow about in granite hieroglyphs for all future ages to read. I do not remember that there is an account of the Retreat from Moscow on any of the military monuments in Paris.

There *was*, in fact, a Moses, and he was born somewhere. Where? Religion and science are both silent. What has legend to say?

We studied legends Talmudic and Christian and Mohammedian, but there was not a hint in any of them as to where the birthplace of Moses might have been. The one passage we came upon that dealt with the Prophet's birth made the quest far cloudier than before. This was in the *Zohar*, the most occult of the Jewish mystical books:

“When Moses was to be born, God caused his Holy Spirit to come out of the Tabernacle ornamented with precious stones. And he appeared crowned with two hundred and forty-eight crowns. And the letter *Mem* appeared and placed on the head of the Holy Spirit three hundred and twenty-five crowns and gave the heavenly keys into his possession. And the letter *Schin*—wearing the three sacred crowns of the Patriarch—came, took off the crowns, and placed them, and the *Keys of the Lord*, before the Holy Spirit. Then came the letter *HeH*, and presented to the Holy Spirit the King's own Crown. And the Holy Spirit arrived on earth. . . .”

On earth . . . but where? Behind the fume and splendour of the *Zohar* the birthplace of the Lawgiver attained a more terrifying remoteness even than the place of his dying. That is a mystery, but at least it is a mystery rendered into explicit words:

“No man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.”

What is more, the mystery is qualified:

"He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor."

That is to say, a region is named for us, whither the pilgrim might repair and build up in his imagination the spectacle of an old man climbing the long slope of a hill and laying himself down in the fold of a valley and wrapping his cloak round him, as he closes his eyes for the last time.

But regarding the birthplace, not a hint anywhere, neither in the Bible nor in post-Biblical tradition. I began to get a little apprehensive. Was it by pure chance the place remained veiled in such mystery? Was it wise to continue my attempts to unveil it? I began to feel that such a journey as had been proposed to me could be ended, but could not be begun.

And then the unveiling took place one day in a house above Rochester, or, to be more exact, a corner of the veil was lifted an inch or two. I happened to be spending a day or two in those parts, and I called in on Jim's father, who is an old soldier; partly because I remembered he had served in Egypt, partly because a cold wind was driving along the Kentish hills, and the thought of sitting down by a fire was attractive.

It was very pleasant in that small house. The tobacco in our pipes puffed and flared. The beer in the stone mugs was good. As I had hoped, Jim's father began telling tales of his soldiering days in the Egyptian desert. It seemed to me that the emotion and experiences of a private soldier in the Israelitic host trekking across the desert of Sin must have had some similarity with his. Now and again he brought out of a cupboard souvenirs that ranged in time between Rameses and Kitchener, of which some were more genuine than others. This was a piece of wrapping from a Pharaoh's mummy. He had acquired this shield of crocodile-skin in the Mahdi's Treasury. This was a scarab worn

in a ring by one of Cleopatra's women. This was a piano-key from General Gordon's own piano. He had played it the very morning of the very day the frantic dervishes had burst in on him.

The old soldier put the souvenirs away carefully and then paused a moment at the cupboard.

"I've a collection of postcards, too," he said a little diffidently. "I always bought postcards whenever we went to a new place. Would you like to see them?"

I said certainly I would.

He lifted a thick block of cards from the shelf and brought them over to me. The cards were wrapped round in brown paper.

"It's getting dark," said the old soldier. "Shall I switch the light on?"

"Yes, please," I said and unwrapped the paper.

The room flooded with light. My eyes fell on the first card. It pictured in vivid orange and scarlet and Prussian blue a broad river at sunset. The sails of two feluccas burned against the flushed further bank. On the right-hand side was a stone embankment with a wooden superstructure in bamboo. Beyond the embankment the green smudge of a tree rose against the sunset brilliance. This was the legend at the foot of the card:

EGYPT.—The Tree showing the place where Moses was found by Pharaoh's Daughter.

I felt my heart knocking violently against my ribs. A dew of sweat stood out on my forehead.

"Is anything the matter?" Jim's father asked anxiously. "You've come all over queer."

"No, I'm all right," I assured him faintly. "Tell me. Have you seen this place? Where is it?" I handed the card over to him.

"O that!" He sounded rather relieved. "Where old Moses was found. Oh yes. I've seen it."

"Where is it?"

"Cairo!" he said.

"Cairo?" I repeated. "Cairo?"

"Yes, Cairo! Why shouldn't it be Cairo?"

"Why not? Oh, no reason at all! Cairo, eh? Cairo!" I seemed capable of uttering no other word.

"Well, why—"

I looked at the card again. "This is the place where Pharaoh's daughter found Moses?"

"Yes."

"You saw it with your own eyes?"

"Yes."

"Tell me one more thing. Did they show you the place where Moses was actually born?"

He scratched his head and thought hard. "No!" he decided. "I can't remember that they did." Then he looked up. "But it can't have been far off, can it?"

The most learned scholars have had nothing wiser to say on the matter.

"We're going off to Cairo to see if we can find out," I said.

§ 2

There were other pilgrims on board the *Champollion* beside Lucas and Jim and me, a company of French priests who were setting forth in Christ's honour, and a company of Mohammedian effendis from Morocco, embarked on the Haj, the annual pilgrimage in honour of Mohammed. We looked at them a little wistfully as they paced the decks or stared down into the water. Their task was easier than ours, we thought. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Mohammed was born in Mecca. As for us, we had no more than a picture-postcard to lead us to the beginning of our journey. Yet, if it was all we had, it was all the more important to us; though we recognized it for the trivial thing it was, printed in colours so lurid that it concealed like a mask the objects it sought to reproduce, and issued so long ago that it was doubtful if the scene it represented had the same

aspect now. It was not merely important to our journey, it was indispensable. It meant the possibility of a beginning somewhere in space and time.

We would go to Cairo and discover the scene pictured in that postcard. Some sort of a tradition had brought it into being, however late and poor. A spot was pointed out on the Cairo river-bank where Pharaoh's daughter had found the child in his ark. Then perhaps the people of Cairo had a tradition regarding an event which went three short months further into the backward and abyss of time; perhaps they pointed out the place where the child was born. We would address ourselves to old men in synagogues and churches and mosques, waiters in the cafés, old women in the markets squatting over their baskets of eggs and cakes. But not there only, it occurred to me, as one of the Moors passed me, flinging his tunic over his shoulder. He was a fine old man, with a broad brow and remote studious eyes. He spent a good many hours of the day poring over his Koran. We must not address ourselves only to the unlettered in Cairo, I told myself. We must repair to the religious leaders of the community. We will inquire from them if they are aware of any traditions on the subject, in their books or on the lips of their people. How heartened we should be, if it should chance that two or three of them recounted to us an identical tradition!

But it would still be nothing more than a tradition, after all. We must not fail to visit the scholars actually at work in Cairo, who come there to collate the results of their latest excavations. The scholars at work outside Egypt have not been helpful. There is hardly a conclusion that one scholar arrives at which his immediate successor does not assail, to be assailed himself in his turn. No, their books have not clarified but voluminously obscured the issue. It may be different in Cairo itself, in the celebrated Museum. Perhaps only a month ago, a week ago, they have found the name of the Prophet Moses on irrefutable contemporary stone, an account of his journeys, perhaps even the name of his birth-

place. They have rigidly refrained from announcing their discovery, even to other scholars, until they have had time to study minutely all the implications of their epoch-making discovery.

I gripped hard on the steamer railings. Would it not be a pretty fantasy, I mused, if the birthplace inscribed on that apocalyptic stone should be identical with the place the old priests in their wisdom told me of, and the old women babbling in the market-place; and on going there I found it to be hard by that very spot on the Cairo river-bank where a Tree rises above a stone embankment with a wooden superstructure in bamboo? Even as the postcard pictured it, which I found in a small house in Rochester that day of cold north wind.

It would be very strange, I mused; but I do not believe that that millennial secret will resolve in terms of such pretty fantasy. I turned my head sharply away from the blue hypnotic sea.

§ 3

We arrived in Cairo about three o'clock in the afternoon. Two hours later we were driving along the river-bank. Two days later we were still driving along the river-bank. Even in Cairo the Nile is a long river. In contemplating the postcard we had not taken sufficient cognizance of the fact that it is a broad river, too, and we soon realized here were a good many places where it would be difficult to identify our Mosaic Tree if it happened to be on the opposite side of the river. Moreover, the two islands of Bolak and Roda extend like vast barges along the Cairo water-front, and these lengthened, if they did not even double, the extent of river-bank to be examined. It was evident that only limited sections of river-bank were going to be visible from the seats of a cab, and we might well have to continue the quest in a felucca.

The postcard accompanied us, of course, on these journeys. But during the first day and throughout the morning of the second day we carefully withheld it from the driver's eye. We

felt that if we could unaided identify the Tree from the penny image of it we carried with us, that would be a moment of glory well worth the sacrifice of a few hours' extra wandering through that bright air.

In the meantime we had begun our questioning. It would take two or three days before we could arrange audiences with the religious heads of the community and with the authorities in the Museum. We addressed ourselves as planned to the casual folk we met as we moved up and down the city: to the waiter who brought our coffee, the shop-girl who sold us handkerchiefs, the hotel-clerk, the boot-black, the guide in the citadel. We asked first if they had any idea where the birthplace of the Prophet Moses was, somewhere along the banks of the river. They had no idea. Then we asked the more modest question, did they know the Tree showing the place where Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter? No-one had any idea of this, either, not even the guide at the citadel, who might have been expected to have professional views and did, in fact, undergo a severe struggle with his conscience. When we posed our question to him, he considered the matter silently for a full minute, and, still saying no word, he signed to us to follow him till we reached a flight of dark steps leading down to the shaft of a huge sunken well. And as we stood there dutifully throwing stones, which he handed us for that purpose, into the black water three hundred feet below, he meditated the issue further. Was it possible or advisable to point this out in future as not only the place where Joseph was imprisoned by Potiphar and interpreted Pharaoh's dream, but as the place where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe and found the child among the bulrushes? His sense of the physical difficulties involved got the better of him. He confined the well to Joseph and informed us sadly that he had no information to give regarding the birthplace or the finding of Moses.

It was becoming clear to us that whatever vitality the tradition possessed in Cairo thirty years ago when our post-card was printed, it had become very feeble if not extinct

by now. However, we were not discouraged. We had made arrangements to visit His Eminence, the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, who might be said in a real sense to be the Prophet's successor in these regions and who might be hoped to extend a special tenderness towards the local Mosaic tradition. We were also to visit His Beatitude, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Copts, the head of the oldest Christian Church in Egypt. The very word "Coptic," we recalled, was identical with the word "Egyptian." Thereafter we were to visit his Eminence Monseigneur the Archbishop of Mount Sinai Convent, whose Church is an autonomous communion in the Greek Orthodox Confession. The Sinaitic community is small, but its especial importance to us was the fact that its headquarters and its chief glory is the Convent of Mount Sinai, which was built fourteen hundred years ago, and has focused upon itself during these many centuries most of the Christian Mosaic devotion and a great deal of its tradition. Finally it had been arranged that we were to be received by His Eminence, the Rector of Al Azhar, the great Muslim University, who, by virtue of that position, is deemed the theological pontiff of all Islam. That was an arrangement from which we hoped as much as from any of the others, if only because Islam has occupied the whole of the Mosaic territory from the land of Goshen to the land of Moab for well over a millennium, apart from the brief challenge of the Crusades.

So soon as the afternoon of the second day we had given up the wistful hope that we would find our Tree by merely getting into a cab and ordering the driver to drive along the river-bank.

"I had better show him the postcard," I said to the others.

"You might as well," they agreed heavily.

I reached forward and showed the driver the postcard.

"Do you know this place?" I asked.

He took the postcard from my hands and turned it sideways and upside down and looked very puzzled.

"This is a tree, and that's a stone embankment, with a

bamboo house on top!" I explained. "See if you can find them!"

He drove up and down for a long time and sought to convince us that this tree or the other tree was the one we sought, but we consulted the postcard and found that it was not so.

We had no more luck on the third day, but a strange thing happened on the fourth. It was quite early, not later than eight o'clock in the morning; or it was early for us Europeans—we had hardly yet realized how very early the Cairene begins his day. A chambermaid knocked at the door.

"Come in!" I said.

She entered. A message had come up to the telephone on the landing. Professor Nesib was downstairs. He wished to speak to us on the subject of the Prophet Moses. "Send him up at once!" I told her excitedly. I knocked on the walls right and left of my room. Lucas and Jim came in hurriedly.

"There is a Professor Nesib downstairs!" I exclaimed.
"He wishes to speak to us about the Prophet Moses!"

"How kind of him to come so early! Who told him about us?" asked Lucas.

"I don't know. He didn't mention anybody. One of our friends in Cairo. He'll soon tell us."

"They're all very kind in Cairo," said Jim.

"They are," I agreed. "I wonder if it was—"

There was a knock at the door. It opened. A tall cadaverous gentleman stood on the threshold. He looked every inch a professor, from the tassel of his tarbush, all the way down his quiet dark overcoat to the heels of his elastic-sided boots. He wore a pair of thick glasses, his cheeks were sunken, his lips were very nearly white.

"Please come in!" I begged him. "I hope you'll forgive our pyjamas. The fact is we were hardly expecting—"

He entered and bowed formally to all three of us as if to convey his forgiveness of our pyjamas. I waved my hand towards an arm-chair, and he sat down.

"I understand you are interested in the *Nebi Musa*, the Prophet Moses," he began in stiff but accurate French. "It will give me pleasure to report to you certain discoveries I have made lately on the subject."

He had a rather sepulchral voice and the skin on his long fingers was so translucent that they almost seemed the fingers of a skeleton.

"Really, it's awfully kind of you," I insisted, "to take all this trouble on our account. I wonder if you could tell us . . . if you could tell us . . ." For some odd reason my voice stuck. I felt the collar of my pyjamas damp against the back of my neck. I started again. "Perhaps you can tell us who mentioned to you that—"

But he was already talking in that corpse-like voice, as if he were indeed a corpse and there were nobody but himself in the sepulchre.

"The village of Tammeou," began Professor Nesib, "is situated about twenty kilometres south of Cairo. It was once called Daminou, for which see Makrizi."

I signed to Lucas hurriedly to take notes. It had already been discovered Lucas was an adroit note-taker. He reached about with some agitation for a pad and pencil.

"You don't mind," I broke in, "if my friend takes a note or two?"

But Professor Nesib did not interrupt his oration, not even with a movement of the head. The leaf-dry voice continued:

"The legend which the inhabitants of the village transmit from father to son narrates that this locality was visited by the *Nebi Musa*, who lived there for a long time, during the period when the palace of the Pharaoh of the Bible was not far off, in the village known to-day as Om Khanan.

"The old folk of the village say that Daminou was once called Zamimou (which means—they have blamed—literary Arabic *zamma*, to blame) because the people blamed the *Nebi Musa* at that time."

Professor Nesib raised his head and looked up towards the

top of the wardrobe. "This interpretation," he said, "obviously belongs to the region of folk lore." The remark seemed not to be addressed to us at all. He lowered his head and resumed.

"The autochthonous inhabitants of Dammou, probably Jews, were exterminated to the last man by a sanguinary and despotic Mameluke. The present inhabitants have come up from the South, from the Province of Assiut.

"The vestiges of the ancient synagogue of which Makrizi speaks are buried on the bank of the Nile. The inhabitants of the village know its site and declare that the *Nebi Musa* prayed there. A flourishing Jewish community lived there till the seventeenth century. About fifty years ago a stone bearing a Hebrew inscription was found on the river-bank, by the father of the present mayor. A government official carried it off, but its present whereabouts are unknown. A part of the walls of the old town still exists, in the neighbourhood of the cemetery . . . *dans les environs du cimetière*. . . ."

His voice ceased. He sat there bolt upright in the arm-chair, the long fingers of his hands pressed together. There was silence for several seconds.

Then—"Thank you!" I broke out. "Thank you! How very kind of you it was to come and tell us all that!"

He did not move his head towards me. "*Pas de quoi!*" he said.

"I wonder," I started awkwardly,—"it's so exactly the sort of thing we've come to find out about—I wonder if it would be possible to go and see that place?" My voice sounded shrill and unnatural in my own ears.

"By all means," said Professor Nesib. "Why not?" There was a slight touch of asperity in his tone.

I lost all sense of decency.

"I don't suppose it would be possible for you to accompany us?" I burst out.

"Why not?" he said again.

"Oh, really? It's magnificent of you!" I tumbled on.

"You see—we've got so little time here in Cairo. . . . How could we get there?"

"By train! Or car!"

"This very afternoon? No, it wouldn't be possible! Oh no! That would be asking too much of you, Professor!"

"I see no reason why not!"

"At two, then?"

He nodded jerkily.

"At two! It really is immensely kind of you! I'll order a car at once. It will be waiting here at two precisely. Perhaps the Professor would like to take a little lunch with us beforehand . . .?"

The Professor rose. "I regret I shall be otherwise occupied till then. At two this afternoon. Good-morning." He bowed from the waist to all three of us successively, then was gone.

The silence this time lasted longer than before. It was broken finally by Jim.

"Phew!" he said.

"Yes!" I agreed.

"Rum bird!" he simplified.

"Yes!" I agreed again.

Lucas was busy scribbling away at his pad. "It's most exciting, all this!" he exclaimed. "Aren't we lucky?"

"Immensely!" I said. "Exactly what we wanted! Who knows where it may lead to? But I wish—"

"Yes?"

"I wish we'd remembered to ask him if he knows any legends tying up the birthplace of Moses with Cairo here."

"Quite right," Lucas agreed. "When once that's fixed, we can start moving."

I was about to ring for hot water when I paused, my finger on the bell-push. "I wonder—" I started.

Lucas lifted his head for a moment. "Well?"

"I wonder who told him about us."

Lucas bit the end of his pencil. "Yes, I wonder." He

got down to his pad again. "We'll get to know this afternoon, of course."

"Of course," I agreed. "I'd better see about that car."

The car was there at two o'clock, but Professor Nesib was not. He was not there at three o'clock, either. At four o'clock it seemed pretty sure something was wrong.

"He might have sent a note or something," I grumbled.

"Perhaps he's been in a car accident," suggested Jim hopefully.

"Let's ring up one or two people," Lucas said. "We ought to try to find out who sent him."

We rang up a number of people, but nobody knew Professor Nesib, or knew his name, even.

"It's odd," I said. "It's very odd."

Lucas sighed. "At all events it means that Moses is in the air in Cairo. Never mind. We'll find out all about him to-morrow."

We did not find out the next day or the day after or the whole time we were in Cairo, though we asked everybody we subsequently came in contact with could they tell us anything about Professor Nesib.

"I can't make it out," said Jim, who is a matter-of-fact young man. "It's as if he wasn't there at all."

"Don't be absurd!" I said, and looked sharply over my left shoulder.

But we discovered that the interview with Professor Nesib was not entirely a dream, or if it was, that some of the facts we had dreamed, were verifiable. There is a village called Tammeou twenty kilometres south of Cairo, situated between Memphis and Hawamdieh. There is a reference in the Arab writer, Makrizi, to a Jewish community settled for several centuries at a place called Dammou, though there is no reason to believe that Tammeou and Dammou are the same place.

"So we didn't dream it," Lucas said. "We'll have to get to this place and see what we can find out."

"If we *did* dream it," I said sadly, "we missed our chance. We should have gone on dreaming till we found out where the *Nebi Musa* was born."

"Perhaps one of the pontiffs will tell us," sighed Lucas.

§ 4

The first of the pontiffs we were privileged to meet was His Beatitude, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Coptic Church.

We were first led into an office, where a vigilant secretary examined carefully both our appearance and the reasons we had for wishing an audience of His Beatitude. At the same time coffee was ordered, and we were joined by half-a-dozen priests, very amiable and full of a simple dignity, wearing long black robes with black stoles, with purple stripes and fringes. Their headgear was a sort of black turban bound round a purple skull-cap. Having successfully passed the scrutiny, we were led over into a reception-room with twenty-four chairs upholstered in grey tapestry ranged neatly along the walls and a great throne emblazoned with a cross at the further end. Along the walls was a series of portraits of the Patriarchs, beginning in oils and ending in chromolithograph.

After a few minutes a word was whispered beyond the door. The priests and the secretary withdrew. We remained quite rigid and silent for some time. It seemed unseemly either to speak or move. Then at length His Beatitude entered, with the priests and the secretary following behind him in procession. He was an old man, still tall, bent though he was with many years. He had a long sparse grey beard. He supported himself on an ebony stick topped with ivory. The skin was thin and translucent, so that his face glowed like an altar-lamp, yet even now it retained something of peasant simplicity. We were not surprised to learn that the Patriarch of the Copts is chosen from among the hermits of the Coptic monasteries in Sinai less for his learning than for his humility and piety.



THE VIRGIN'S TREE

We were presented to him. He blessed us and asked what we wished to inquire from him. The interpreter stated we were on a journey in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver, and desired to know if there was any tradition among his people in Cairo that Moses was born in these parts. He narrowed his eyes and looked closely at us. We wondered what that examination portended. Then he broke out into laughter, a reassuring, almost an affectionate laughter.

"Moses is very much in the air these days!" he railed at us. "And why not? Were we not all Jews before we were Christians?"

He took three amber rosaries out of a pocket in the folds of his robes and gave us one each, still smiling, like a father surprising his children with toys or sweets.

"I cannot thank His Beatitude enough," I whispered. "But if I might dare to ask again——"

The secretary, somewhat scandalized, lifted his finger to his mouth. The robes of the attendant priests rustled. The light went out in the Patriarch's face, as if a wick had been turned down. His eyes became remote, unseeing. He moved off, his sanctity round him like a cloud.

We followed a minute later, a little sad and bewildered, out into the strident street.

His Eminence, the Chief Rabbi of Egypt, was more prodigal with his time. He received us in his apartment in the district of Cairo called Garden City, and discussed not only the question we brought to him but also every aspect of our journey. It was a modern room, suffused with the mild light of shaded lamps, with good etchings on the walls and crowded bookshelves in the recesses. This man was no hermit from out of the desert; he had been an intimate friend and adviser of the late King Fuad, and was still prominent in the councils of the city.

His eyes twinkled humorously behind the thick lenses of his glasses. It was not he who told us that they were worn out with much study and had been operated on and were

shortly to be operated on again. He threw himself whole-heartedly into our inquiry. He could tell us of a synagogue, by name Ben Ezra, out in the old Fostât quarter, which is stated by a venerable tradition to be the place where Moses went out of the city and spread abroad his hands unto the Lord, and prayed that the plague of hail might cease. He could recall the excavation of a stone not many kilometres off on which was carved the name of Moses, though whether that meant the Prophet was doubtful, for Mosi is an Egyptian word which means, simply, "born." He played the game of place-names dexterously, shifting about syllables from one word to another like a child moving about his blocks. He filled the room with a sort of holy gaiety.

And when, two or three hours later, we found ourselves walking along the silent river-bank, we realized we were not an inch further advanced in our inquiry. We realized the saintly play-boy had not only been playing with syllables and place-names.

His Eminence Monseigneur the Archbishop of Mount Sinai Convent received us with affability, for we had already been commended to him by Major Jarvis, till lately Governor of Sinai, a man who has even so soon become a living legend in all that territory. His Grace wore the black conical hat and rusty black soutane of the simple Greek priest. He was small, with a well-trimmed grey-black beard, and blue eyes twinkling behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He gathered from Major Jarvis's letter that we wished to spend a week or two in the Convent at Mount Sinai, as we were engaged on a pilgrimage in the steps of the great Prophet of the Holy Mountain. He would be delighted to furnish us with the warmest credentials. We had only to say the word and the treasures of the matchless library were ours for the most leisureed examination.

We expressed our gratitude, but in that same moment his eye and mouth hardened. He began to speak of the Codex Sinaiticus, the text which the British Museum recently bought for one hundred thousand pounds from the Kremlin. By

rights it still belonged to the library on Sinai. It had been purloined by a ruse by the unworthy German scholar, Tischendorff. He continued the subject for some time, then stopped, regretting that he had opened out on a subject which could not be so interesting to us as to himself.

“But please!” we insisted.

“No, no, I beg you!” he smiled. “If there is some other matter you might care to consult me on——”

“There is indeed!” I assured him. I explained what it was.

He laughed softly into his beard. “His Eminence the Grand Rabbi will be more competent to answer your question than I.”

“We have already seen him,” we said forlornly. “We could learn nothing.”

“Then there is nothing to learn,” he said. “Perhaps you should address yourselves to the scholars,” he suggested, “though I understand that the scholars have now placed the crossing of the Red Sea at Panama. At the Behring Straits, too, I believe. And the manna that fell from heaven was a shoal of flying fish.”

“They do not make things easy for us,” I said.

“And not for us either.” Once more the gentle blue eyes hardened. “Do you know what he said? Do you know how he got it out of us?”

We knew that his mind had returned to the unworthy Tischendorff.

“He said that he was developing lumbago up in the cold air of Mount Sinai. He implored us to let him have the Codex so as to copy it out here in Cairo. And what happened then?” He told us at some length what happened then.

And then once more he turned to us, a tiny spot of colour burning in his cheeks. He turned outward the palms of his hands. “Forgive me!” he begged. “Forgive me! Please see that you have an ample supply of rugs with you. It is essential you should not develop lumbago on Mount Sinai.”

There was one more pontiff to whom we had arranged to

address ourselves, before we transferred our inquiry from the world of religion to the world of exact scholarship. This was His Eminence the Rector of Al Azhar, the great Islamic University, who is deemed the first savant of the Faith. It is to Al Azhar that the sheikhs come to carry back to their communities in Turkey, India, China, all over the Muslim world, a knowledge of pure Arabic and the true theology of the Koran.

The rectorial offices are in an opulent granite building opposite the venerable and magnificent mosque of Al Azhar. We climbed a great marble stairway under a ceiling of stalactite moulding and after a brief delay were ushered into the presence of His Eminence. He greeted us courtly, touching his heart, his eyes and his lips. We were more than a little diffident of putting a question to him which he might well deem belonged more to the world of old wives' tales than to the world either of religion or exact scholarship. The diffidence was increased by the extreme business efficiency of the room, the glass-topped desk, the leather chairs, the filing cabinets, the electric heaters, the telephones. The body of the room was contemporary Chicago, its spirit, as we found very soon, was seventh-century Mecca.

We put our question. His Eminence shut his eyes and paused for one moment. Then he spoke.

"We know nothing outside the Koran," he said slowly, "and there is nothing to be known. The Nebi Musa is mentioned in six passages in the Koran. We know him to have been the chief Prophet of the Old Testament as Jesus was the chief Prophet of the New Testament. We recognize the merit of their Law for their own time and people. But they are only the forerunners. As there is only one Allah, so there is only one Prophet—and that is Mohammed. He is revealed in the Koran. There is no truth outside the Koran's truth."

A long silence followed. Then I took my courage in my hands. I begged to explain that my inquiry did not belong to the sphere of theology or religion. I was aware that the

Arabs in Palestine point out a tomb near Jericho as the tomb of the Nebi Musa, and that the place is much venerated locally. I wondered whether, in that same spirit, the folk round these parts pointed out a locality as the Prophet's birthplace.

His Eminence rose. "We know nothing outside the Koran," he said again, "and there is nothing to be known." His voice was firm but his brown eyes beamed kindly on us. Once more he touched his heart, his eyes, his lips. We descended the great marble stairway under a roof of stalactite moulding. We looked out through the airy steel-frame windows upon a sky punctuated with ancient minarets.

§ 5

It was now abundantly clear we could expect no help from the leaders of organized religion. It was possible that, quite simply, having never devoted a thought to the subject, they knew nothing about it, and did not like to say so. It was also possible that they thought, or at least some of them thought, it was not right to open out on a matter regarding which Holy Scripture has been silent. The time had come to present ourselves to the lay scholars.

So it was, a morning or two later, we made our way to the Cairo Museum, carrying letters of introduction to Dr. Pappenheim, a distinguished British Egyptologist. (It is possible I do not transcribe the name correctly.) We had seen the dawn come up among the pyramids, and were in a mood of some solemnity. We remembered that those monuments stood there, looking much as they look now, on the morning of the day the small Moses was born somewhere along this river-bank, in a mud house thatched with reed. So too they dressed themselves against such fields of daffodils and tiger-lily, the day Abraham, the ancestor of Moses, came up out of Canaan into this land.

We were, I say, in a mood of some solemnity when we presented ourselves and our letters in the vestibule of the

Museum. We were informed Dr. Pappenheim would be inaccessible for a couple of hours, would we wander about the Museum or come next day? We determined to wander about the Museum, and our footsteps gravitated to the brilliant, the perhaps too brilliant, relics of Tutankhamen. When most of the two hours was gone, we remembered our appointment and slowly retraced our steps. A thought which had been only hazy before, took more definite shape in our minds now. We began to apprehend how stupendous was the courage of the man Moses to set himself up against a civilization that operated between such chimærical extremes of mammoth grace and insect delicacy.

A moment now occurred that I would like briefly to dwell on, for though it occurred thus early in the Mosaic journey, before even it had really started, it was never transcended, for me at least, during the whole of the subsequent experience.

My friends had disappeared somewhere. They were invisible behind the stone trunks of that far-branching museum forest. I was about to go and find them, when I heard a sentence uttered only a few feet away from where I stood.

“And this,” a quiet voice said, “is the stele of Menephtah.”

It was the voice of an Englishman, perhaps an official of the staff of the Museum. Perhaps even it was Dr. Pappenheim, to whom I bore letters of introduction. If it was, this was no time to present them, for he had a group of friends with him and he doubtless preferred to take them round without being under the necessity of being civil to a stranger. Feeling it was not a very guilty eavesdropping, I composed myself to listen to his exposition. The Menephtah stele was a stone of particular relevance to our adventure, as we had learned while we were studying the books in England, and I felt a little ashamed that it had passed so completely out of my mind. It is a tall black granite slab discovered by Professor Flinders Petrie in the mortuary temple that the Pharaoh Menephtah put up in Thebes to house his own bones, over three thousand

years ago. Its interest to us was twofold. The Pharaoh Meneptah is the traditional Pharaoh of the Exodus, and that was a tradition which, for reasons I will not elaborate here, we found ourselves constrained to follow. Further, this was the stone which contained the first recorded reference to the existence of Israel as a people.

The stone was discovered in 1896. It goes so far as to mention Israel. Since that time no inscription had been dug up, so far as we were aware, which went one stage further, and gave an Egyptian corroboration of the Israelitic story of the Sojourn and Exodus. Our chief preoccupation in the Museum was just that—had this corroboration been at length discovered, a month ago, a week ago? Perhaps in Karnak, or Tanis, or perhaps even in Memphis, of which Stanley had written long ago: “There the Pharaohs lived at the time of the Exodus; and there, if its monuments had remained, might have been found the traces of the Israelites which we seek in vain elsewhere.” Had they, then, at length been found in Memphis? Had the seeking elsewhere at length proved not in vain?

But the quiet scholar telling his friends the history of the Meneptah stele, and translating the hieroglyphs chiselled on its sullen face, confined himself for the moment to that one monument.

“He was an unscrupulous fellow, this Meneptah,” murmured the quiet scholar, “though he was no worse than his father, Rameses the Second. In the third year of his reign he conducted a series of triumphant campaigns in the borders of his empire and wanted to let posterity know about it. He didn’t have the least hesitation in sneaking a slab which an earlier Pharaoh had used to make a list of the buildings he’d set up to the glory of the gods. You’ll find his list here, on the reverse side of the slab.” He walked round a foot or two, and the listeners followed him. Then he came back again. “The other side was let into the wall,” he continued. “Then old Meneptah had this side inscribed with the record of his triumphs. Here they are. This is the part which interests

us." He bent towards the ten-foot wall of inscriptions and began to translate, slowly tracing the hieroglyphs with his finger.

*"No longer is there the lamenting of man sighing,
The villages are at peace once more.
He who has tilled his crop will eat it.
Ra has turned himself to Egypt.
Pharaoh Menepthah is born with the intent to avenge it.
The kings are overthrown, crying: Mercy!
Not one holds up his head among the Nine Bows, the Barbarian
Peoples.
Conquered are the Libyans.
The Hittites are pacified.
Canaan is plundered with every ill.
Carried away is Askelon.
Gezer is taken.
Yenoam is no more . . ."*

And then he paused for two seconds. His finger had come to the first hieroglyph in a brief passage which had been rubbed over with chalk dust to make it stand out from the soot-like drabness before and after. Perhaps he paused only to draw breath. Perhaps, though his finger had traced these next characters a hundred times, they still possessed the faculty to quicken his heart-beats for just those two seconds. But when he spoke again, the two seconds having gone by, his voice was as calm and even as before, translating those characters that the Pharaoh Menepthah had caused to be inscribed in Thebes, in the time of Moses, three thousand years ago.

"Israel is desolated, his seed is not."

He stopped again. I could have sworn he half-turned his head as if somehow his ear registered a faint sound some half-dozen feet from where he stood, a sound that beat like thunder in my ears, the triumphant repudiation of my racing blood-pulses.

That is not true, Pharaoh Meneptah. Israel is not desolated. His seed endures. I who linger here alive in the shadow of your dead stone, attest it. The sealed Pyramids are unsealed and desolated. The tomb of Tutankhamen is desolated, the spearsmen that guarded the entrance are a show behind glass walls. Your palace is desolated. No man knows for certain where the place was where you abode.

The arrogance that bade you have that millennial lie hacked out upon your stone was born again in another and another Meneptah, in other lands and later ages. But each was desolated. Pharaoh Meneptah lives at this day, but he will be desolated.

You did not and you do not speak true, Pharaoh Meneptah.

The quiet scholar got down once more to the stone, as if, after all, he had heard nothing. As for myself, I moved off to find my friends. My knees were so weak I almost fell. Though the air about me was as cold as a charnel-house, the sweat poured in streams down my cheeks.

Some five or ten minutes later my friends and I were in the vestibule again, waiting for the appearance of Dr. Pappenheim. The attendant who had spoken to us earlier, took us over to a small glass-partitioned room by the entrance.

“Dr. Pappenheim will be along in a minute or two,” he said, and left us.

I was greatly looking forward to a few minutes of conversation with the quiet scholar of the Meneptah stele. The four pontiffs had been amiable, but it could not be said they had been helpful. The quiet scholar would be both, I thought. A rather sad smile played about the corners of his mouth, and there was a sort of dimness and distance in his eyes, as if the successive dynasties of Pharaohs had washed over them like waves of lethal water.

At this moment I heard a noise from far off, coming down the echoing corridors of the Museum. It sounded like the noise of a small and angry crowd, excepting that crowds do not usually move so quickly. I speculated a little crossly

whether the attendants had surprised a museum thief trying to purloin a necklace from one of the show-cases. I did not want my colloquy with the quiet scholar once again held up, and by so gross an interruption.

And one moment later, the noise was at the glass-partitioned room we sat in. The door was flung open so violently, the whole thing shook in its frames. A small man was in the room with us; a scholar, an admirable scholar, as I have ascertained subsequently. But he was not quiet. The air about him hissed as he moved. His eyes glared behind his spectacles. He waved two sheets of paper before us. We recognized the letters of introduction we had consigned to him.

"What's it all about, I want to know!" said the unquiet scholar. "Is this a Commercial Enterprise? Is it, or isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon!" I stammered. "Dr. Pappenheim, I take it?"

He did not answer my question.

"I hoped that our letters explained who we were," I went on, my voice thickening a little, "and what we wanted. You see, we are undertaking a journey in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver, and we wanted to find out—"

"*Moses!*" he exclaimed. "*Moses!*" I feel as if I had spoken of a rather shady jockey. "What has Moses got to do with the Museum in Cairo? I'm afraid I've got people waiting for me upstairs."

"I will be brief," I said. Lucas's eyes were beginning to sparkle. There was an odd noise in Jim's throat. I resumed the reasons that bade us commend ourselves to the courtesy of the Museum of Cairo.

Dr. Pappenheim's fingers played an accelerating tattoo on the table in the middle of the room. Lucas thrust in three or four terse words.

"Do you want to be of any use or don't you?" Lucas is tall and has broad shoulders.

Dr. Pappenheim looked up and looked down. "What

have you read on the subject?" he asked. "Have you read Gardiner and Peet?"

Lucas said we had read Gardiner and Peet. He mentioned a few more names, I added a few more. The scholar's lip curled contemptuously as the list proceeded. "And, of course, the Bible!" I concluded.

"*The Bible!*" he exploded. "*The Bible!*" It was as if I had spoken of Old Moore's Almanac.

Lucas's lips were by now as thin and level as a length of drawn wire.

"I'll see what I can do," said Dr. Pappenheim, "about drawing you up a Bibliography."

Lucas stretched forth his hands and seized Jim and me each by a shoulder.

"Let's get out!" he said. Or that was how I interpreted the sound he made.

The odd noise in Jim's throat was loud and continuous by now.

"Yes, I think we should go," I said a little anxiously. And we went.

We came out into the open space in front of the Museum and halted. I saw both Lucas and Jim making slight movements with their mouths, as if they wished to utter words, but for the time being they could not.

"Let's just walk for five minutes," I begged them, "and not say anything."

We turned left and walked towards the line of railings that ran along the Museum compound.

Then Lucas stopped. "Have you got a match?" he said hoarsely.

My heart jumped. I remembered the feat of the young man who burned down the library of Halicarnassus.

"It wouldn't burn!" I insisted. "Besides, they'd see you!"

He wished only to light a cigarette. He lit it and smoked it down to the last half-inch, and only then trusted himself to speak.

"So much for the scholars!" he brought out.
"They're not all like that, I'm quite sure!"
"No more scholars!" he insisted grimly. "Not in Cairo."

"Perhaps not in Cairo!" I echoed miserably. We had attained the Sharieh Kasr-en-Nil by this time.

"What are we going to do?" asked Jim tearfully. "Nobody seems any use."

He was right. Neither religion nor scholarship seemed able, or disposed, to help us a foot along our road.

"We've got to get started!" said Jim. "We've got to get moving! You know," he demonstrated with both hands, "moving!"

"I have a conception of the meaning of the word," I said frigidly. "And how do you propose to get moving?" We were all tired. We had got into a cab by now.

"All we have to do," he said, "is to find out the place shown in father's postcard. Where Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter."

My nerves were a little frayed, but I did not shout. I shut my eyes instead. "How do you propose to do that?" I said.

"Well, I should drive to the nearest Arab café," he said, a little hesitantly.

"And then?"

"I'd ask the driver to dig out the oldest man in the place. He ought to be really old. No teeth, or anything."

"And then?"

"We'd ask him to take us to the Tree. You know, the Tree where—"

"I know which Tree," I said. "And you think—" I turned to Lucas. "Shall we?"

"We'll have a meal first," said Lucas grimly.

That happened. It was a long time since we had eaten anything. Then we drove up to the nearest Arab café.

"The oldest man in the place," I ordered the cab-driver. "It's no good if he's got any hair or teeth."

An old man was disinterred from the back of the café. He was the oldest man not only in the café, but in all Cairo. He was as wrinkled as a scorched leaf. He wore a tattered *djellabiyyeh* and a British khaki coat which looked as if it had endured more than one Great War. He was rather deaf, and it took a long time to explain to him what was wanted. But when at last it got across to him, he started twittering excitedly.

“Abdullah knows!” he cried out. “Abdullah knows!”

“What’s that?” asked Jim.

“Abdullah knows!”

Jim’s eye shone. He said nothing. He dared not trust himself to speak.

“Well?” I asked Lucas.

“Let’s see what Abdullah knows,” he said.

We helped the old man into the seat beside the driver. “Drive quickly,” I said. “We want to get there before the light goes!”

We cantered off smoothly southward, down the *Sharia el Mansour*, till we reached the part of the city called Old Cairo, *Masr-el-Atika*, and turned in towards the river-bank. We drove for some distance up the bank, parallel with one of the islands. We had been in this direction once or twice previously.

“Roda Island?” I asked.

“Roda Island!” the driver corroborated.

We turned in at length on our right hand opposite a small white mosque and found ourselves on a narrow foreshore, with two or three boats moored along the edge of the water. Further downstream stretched a flotilla of close-massed *feluccas*.

“Stop!” the old man cried.

We stopped.

“Over there!” He twisted his sinewy neck round, and pointed northward and a little cross-stream to the island, which was some three or four hundred yards distant at this point.

"Where do you mean?"

"There!" said Abdullah. "The end of the island! The very end!" He scrambled down from the driver's seat with the agility of a stripling.

Jim was rubbing his hands together and singing, a habit he has when he is excited. I took the postcard out of my pocket. Jim took it out of my hands. After all, it was his father's postcard. Our three heads crowded round it. My hands were trembling, but I tried to keep all emotion out of my voice.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Does it look anything like it?"

"There's a stone embankment there!" Lucas admitted.

"There's miles of it," I said, "up and down. The top of the embankment looks like a sort of aqueduct here on the postcard."

"You couldn't see that from here in any case." Lucas took the postcard from Jim's hands, and compared the image again with the object. "Then, of course, in the postcard here, the embankment continues till it curves out into a bay or bastion. I don't see anything like it over there."

"The postcard shows only one Tree," I said inexorably. "There are too many trees."

Jim was beginning to look more and more unhappy. "They may have grown since then," he ventured.

"Yes, that's quite likely," I admitted. "The same applies to the bulrushes. I mean there aren't any bulrushes anywhere, and they may have died off since then."

"We'll go and see, won't we?" he urged.

"Of course we'll go and see!"

By this time a group of boatmen had come up from their boats beside the water's edge.

"Boat?" they asked. "Felucca? Go for a nice trip?"

A little chaffering followed, in which Abdullah was very voluble. He was not going to allow his pilgrims to be victimized by these unlettered river-folk. We settled terms at length, and got into the boat. The boatman waded out and pushed us off, then he got in after us.

It was near sunset now. The sun was a brilliant brass on the water. The muezzin came out on the parapet of the mosque beyond the foreshore and lifted his voice long and loud. A small girl in a lilac dress came down the bank and filled a petrol-tin at the river's edge. Then she raised the tin on to her head and walked up the bank again, swinging like a harebell. The water-drops flung from our oars shone like a scatter of fish. The sails of the sliding feluccas seemed woven out of thread unpicked from copper lilies. We were now rowing level with the feluccas that reared their snub bows between us and the roof-tops. The decks were crowded with sacks of wheat and sugar, pyramids of petrol-tins, crates of fruit, towering mounds of vegetables. On the tip of each mast, that dipped as lithe as a grass-blade, a great brown hawk was perched against indigo sky. Wherever there was empty space on the decks, the riverside folk were gathered, the men and boys singing or calling out to each other from boat to boat, the women and girls cooking supper over charcoal braziers. In the boat nearest to us somebody lit a paper lantern, which made the faces gathered round it shine like ghosts at cock-crow. Overhead a wind which had no relation with lower airs and waters combed a cloud into a pearl-grey fleece. Far on the left the west bank checked the silver prairie. Against the sky-line a palm and a pyramid, a palm and a pyramid, were cut clear and final like hieroglyphs on a slab. Then all these were obliterated suddenly behind a grey blank mass. The island had come out upon us and taken us unawares.

“We’re there!” cried Jim. “We’re there!”

I blinked and shook my head. The stone embankment towered high over us, and high over the embankment towered a tangle of black trees. The boat clicked lightly against the lowest stair in a stairway that came down to the water.

“Is this the place, Abdullah?” I cried.

He shook his head. “Up! Up!” he pointed.

The boatman made us fast to a heavy iron ring. Abdullah got out first and clambered up the stairway on all fours.

He looked oddly ape-like. We got out and followed him, and saw two faces, white with dust, staring down at us over the wall, like the blossom of some curious moony plant. Then the two faces withdrew.

“Come!” Abdullah called to us from the top stair. “This way!”

We followed and found ourselves in an old garden, or rather the ruin of a garden, heavy with the odours of lush plants gone to seed, and water in choked wells and conduits. There had once been a red-painted summer-house in the garden, but that was a ruin too, though fragments of gay frescoes survived on the interior walls. There had been buildings on this headland a thousand years or more. Chipped cornices and drums of pillars lay in the fat soil.

It seemed as if only a month ago, or a week ago, someone had decided to put all this ruin to rights again. Bags of cement sprawled among the roots of baobab and jacaranda. A wheelbarrow lay up-ended under the fretted vanes of a banana-tree. The two moony ones were squatting on their haunches, mixing a mess of mortar with two staves.

The centre of the garden was being excavated for some purpose, at the orders, perhaps, of a new Pasha building himself a new summer-house. There was an old well in the centre of the excavations, which was being cleaned and modernized. Here and there carved stones lay about, that had once had their place in Mameluke or Saracen buildings.

Abdullah was flitting about busily among the stones. He moved with extraordinary speed despite his great age.

“Pharaon!” he kept on repeating. “Pharaon!”

He looked down into the dark well, as if he expected to find the face of Pharaon looking up at him. A moment later he was signalling to us urgently from among the tree-trunks. “This way!” he called. He still looked ape-like, but there was something oddly priest-like, too, in the wrinkled face and bowed shoulders.

We followed. The place he was leading us to was clearly

FIELD OF ZOAN



on the other side of the island, which had all this time been invisible. Sky and water flared out upon us. We were out of the tangled garden. We stood against a stone embankment, of which the top came breast-high. We followed him along the embankment for twenty yards or more. Then he stopped.

"Here is the Tree!" Abdullah said. He placed his hand on the trunk of a tamarisk which grew out high over the embankment. "Here is the Tree!"

I took out for the last time the postcard I had carried away with me from the old soldier's house in Rochester, in Kent. The embankment was as the postcard pictured it. Its surface was grooved, with a sort of aqueduct where water had once run to water the garden. It continued till it curved out into the bastion. The bamboo superstructure which had once been here, if this was the place, was here no more. Beyond the bastion, here on our left hand, rose the dark Tree.

I placed the postcard back into my pocket.

"That is enough," I murmured. "We can go forward now."

Lucas came into my room that night just as I was about to switch my bedside light off.

"Yes?" I asked. "You look worried."

"No, I'm not worried," he said. "I only hope you're not taking it too seriously."

"You mean Roda Island? Oh no. I have an idea how much it's worth. I should say the idea goes back to the time when Cairo developed a tourist industry."

"That's about right," he said. "You see, don't you, that if that was really the place where Miriam deposited the ark of bulrushes, she must have swum across the river with the handle in her mouth?"

"Exactly."

"And yet—"

"Yes?"

"You never know with the Nile, you know. This arm of the Nile might not have been in existence then."

"That's quite true, too."

"One assumes that Moses must have been born in the land of Goshen. It would be very hard to say that this region could have formed part of the land of Goshen."

"It never actually says in the Bible he was born in the land of Goshen," I murmured. "Why shouldn't there have been a few Israelite families living outside Goshen?"

The idea interested him. "Yes. The Pharaoh of that time lived about fourteen miles up the river. He might well have had a river-palace somewhere round here. Why shouldn't there have been a number of Israelite families living in this region, like the King's Jews in the Early Middle Ages?"

"Or those privileged Jews who lived in St. Petersburg at the time when the rest of their people were herded together in the Pale of Russia?"

"It's obvious the Egyptians liked to have the Israelite women round them anyway. You remember only the male children were to be destroyed?"

I smiled.

"Why do you smile?" he asked.

"Who was it talked about not taking Roda Island too seriously?"

"One never knows," he defended himself.

"One never has known," I murmured. "One never will."

I did not find it easy to sleep that night, though my heart was curiously at peace. The cars hooted no more than fifty yards beyond my window, and the Nile waters flowed a half-mile away or more. Yet it was the hooting of the cars that sounded unreal and far, and it was the river that rippled quietly beside my ear, with a small wind stirring the tops of the bulrushes. A clot of darkness thickened for a moment at the base of the reeds by the river's edge. It was shaped like a cradle, but the cradle was empty, the child was not yet born. And as I lay there another sound was woven into the sound of the lapping river and became indistinguishable from it. It

was the voice of my father, some Friday night long years ago, telling a tale out of a vast dog-eared folio, on which the light of the Sabbath eve candlesticks dimly shone.

And it came to pass, said my father, that Pharaoh dreamed a dream. That was before the small babe was born who was to lead us forth out of the Land of Bondage. And in his dream Pharaoh sat upon his throne and an old man came and stood before him, holding a pair of scales in his hand. In the one scale, lo and behold, all the glory of Egypt was piled up, the princes and the captains and the charioteers; in the other scale was nothing but a tender kid. And as he looked, the scale where the kid lay came heavily down and the piled glory of Egypt rose as if it were but a feather's weight.

So Pharaoh awoke, and being much troubled, summoned his counsellors to interpret his dream. But they knew not what to say, and were much afraid. Then Pharaoh summoned Balaam, who was wisest of them.

‘Read me this dream!’ said Pharaoh, and Balaam said: ‘Surely the tender kid is a child that shall be born unto the people of Israel, and the glory of Egypt will be as chaff before the fire of it, and the princes and the captains will be consumed, and the charioteers!’

So Pharaoh struck his forehead and said: ‘What counsel hast thou for me? Give me counsel!’ But Balaam was white and witless and said: ‘Counsel have I none, Pharaoh! In this land is none. Summon therefore the two wisest men in all the eastern countries, Jethro of Midian and Job are their names; these, it may be, may bring counsel with them out of their stars.’

And Jethro came, and Job came. And Pharaoh said unto Jethro: ‘Give me counsel, I pray you, regarding the danger that is on my house.’

And Jethro said: ‘There is no counsel other than this, Pharaoh of Egypt. Do thou cease now and for evermore from the affliction with which thou weighest down these people. For the Lord of Hosts is with them, and against Him the stocks and stones will not prevail. Let them, therefore,

being free men, go forth again to the land of Canaan, whence they came and whither they shall go again!'

And at these words the face of Pharaoh darkened exceedingly, and Jethro was thrust back in ignominy to the land of Midian. And on this Pharaoh turned to Job and said: 'Give me counsel, I pray, regarding the danger that is on my house.'

And Job, being mindful of the ignominy of Jethro, said: 'Are not all the dwellers in this land as the grass under thy feet? Shalt thou not do as thou wilt, Pharaoh, with thine own grass?'

And Pharaoh turned wrathfully away from him and said unto Balaam: 'Speak then, Balaam, speak, lest it go evil with thee!'

And Balaam said: 'Even as my Lord commandeth. For mine eyes have studied the stars and the waters, the bird in flight and the entrails of the sacrifice, and these things I have read therein. Seek no more the undoing of these people by the fire, for their father Abraham was delivered from the fire in which the Chaldeans cast him. Seek no more their undoing by the sword, for their father Isaac was delivered from the sword which was raised against him. Seek no more to waste them with the hard task thou puttest upon them, for their father Jacob was not wasted by the hard taskmaster, Laban. Not with fire nor sword nor labour shall thou undo them, but by water only, with which they have not been tried unto this day. See therefore that the male children shall be cast into water, into water, into water . . .'

My father's voice grew more and more drowsy in that small kitchen in Doomington, as the last candles guttered in their sockets. The water chuckling and tugging away among the bulrushes grew more and more drowsy. I was asleep soon.

CHAPTER TWO

§ I

THE car was drawn up along the kerb outside our hotel. Ibrahim the chauffeur was roping kitbags on to the luggage-carrier. Lucas and Jim were busy stowing things away inside the car. I had just said good-bye to the proprietor and was descending the hotel stairs when suddenly I espied Professor Nesib stepping off the edge of the pavement into the roadway. I could have sworn to it then it was Professor Nesib, I could swear to it now—the scholar who had come out of nowhere and vanished into nothing, Professor Nesib complete with tarbush, glasses, long grey overcoat, elastic-sided boots.

“Professor Nesib!” I cried and hurled myself after him, down the crowded street and on to the roadway. At that moment the traffic lights changed. A cataract of traffic was let loose upon me. I escaped several deaths from the plunging hooves of horses and the swerving wheels of cars. I somehow reached the other side of the road and looked round for Professor Nesib. I dived down one side street and another and could find no trace of Professor Nesib. Then I made my way back towards the other two and told them what had happened.

“He wasn’t there,” said Jim, with decision. “Didn’t I tell you so last time?”

“What do you mean,” I said hotly, “he wasn’t there? I tell you I *saw* him! I never make mistakes over faces.”

“I don’t mean he wasn’t there! I mean he was a ghost!”

“Let’s get on with this packing!” I said roughly. “Where’s my rucksack?”

“Here!” said Lucas. It was dangling by one of its straps over his forearm. “Perhaps it was!” he said contemplatively.

“What?”
 “A ghost! An Egyptian ghost!”
 “What are you talking about?”
 “You remember in the Book of Exodus an Egyptian smote
 a Hebrew?”
 “Yes?”
 “And then Moses smote the Egyptian?”
 “Yes?”
 “Perhaps the ghost of that Egyptian is interested in
 us.”

I walked round to the back of the car to see if the kitbags
 were roped on properly. Then I came round again.

“To Memphis, Ibrahim!” I said.
 “I take it we’re definitely not going to Tammeou?” asked
 Lucas.

“Tammeou?” I had for the moment forgotten.
 “Where Professor Nesib was going to take us.”
 I turned brusquely round to Ibrahim.
 “To Memphis, Ibrahim!”
 “*Quais!* Good!” Ibrahim replied.

He started the engine, but before he got into gear he
 lifted his tarbush with his left hand and pressed it down over
 his forehead towards his left eye. We were to discover it
 was in this way he marked his sense of a big moment.

I must say at once that this next step was not dictated
 by any text in the Biblical narrative, or by any specific
 tradition that the childhood of Moses was spent in that city.
 Indeed, the Bible tells us no more than this, that after the
 discovery of the child in the bulrushes by Pharaoh’s daughter,
 his mother was brought to nurse him, and then, presumably
 after he was weaned, he was brought to the Princess, “and
 he became her son.” We are told nothing at all about his
 childhood or youth. The very next sentence takes us at
 once to what happened “when Moses was grown up.”

None the less he must have spent the intervening years
 somewhere. Where? The traveller must first ask himself

who that Pharaoh was whose daughter found a child in the bulrushes and took him to be her son.

As I have implied earlier, no record has yet come to light which fixes his name beyond all argument. It is possible no such record will ever be discovered, for the theme was perhaps one that the Egyptian chroniclers may have considered too trivial or too distasteful to perpetuate. Now, the father of that daughter, as the text makes plain, is that same Pharaoh who imposed such grievous burdens on the people of Israel that he is often spoken of as the Pharaoh of the Oppression.

Which Pharaoh was he? It was the one for whom, as it is written, they built "store cities, Pithom and Raamses." It has always been believed that this Raamses was named after the second Rameses, a great conqueror and builder of the Nineteenth Dynasty, who reigned some thirteen hundred years before our era. The majority of scholars have been inclined to accept the tradition, though efforts have been made from time to time to riddle holes in it. This is no place to discuss the pros and cons of the conflicting theories. It can be stated, I think, that it is the tendency of the archæologists now at work in Egypt, of those, at least, who place any credence in the Biblical narrative, to corroborate this identification with Rameses the Second.

That was the belief, then, which provided us with some sort of an outline for our journeys in Egypt. Rameses the Second was the father of that princess who found the Israelite infant among the bulrushes. It was to her father's court that the Princess took him, some eighteen months later, after his mother had weaned him. And her father's court at that period, during the earlier part of her reign, was in all probability in Memphis, some fourteen miles up the river, whither we at a later day were faring now.

Memphis was already a city of extreme antiquity when the child, Moses, was brought there. It had been founded three thousand years earlier by the Pharaoh, Menes, who united the delta country and the river country into one great king-

dom, and diverted the course of the Nile to build a firm foundation for his capital. For five hundred years Memphis remained the seat of government, with the god Ptah as its supreme deity; but some two hundred and fifty years later, after a period of feudal disintegration, the city of Thebes rose above the southern horizon as the capital of the reunited kingdom, and the god Amon took the place of Ptah. Another period of disintegration followed, and this time it was a race of Asiatic usurpers, commonly known as the Hyksos, or the Shepherd Kings, who took advantage of the chaos to make themselves masters of Egypt. It was probably during this period that the forerunners of the people later to be known as Israelites first appeared on the Egyptian scene. Once more a Theban family rose to the high necessity of the occasion. Thebes became the capital again, but the capital of a kingdom the Hyksos experience had endowed with a vision which looked out far beyond its natural borders. Egypt became a great Empire, and amongst the most energetic of its emperors was this same Rameses the Second, builder and conqueror. Thebes still remained his official capital, but it is generally agreed that in the earlier part of his reign Rameses lived in Memphis, not only because the axis of events was carrying him inexorably northward, but also because he preferred to place as great a distance as possible between himself and the god, Amon, of whose power he was jealous and afraid, and who was worshipped in Thebes in a way he himself had a mind to be worshipped in Memphis.

To resume. Rameses the Second was the Pharaoh of the Oppression. He was the father of that Princess who found Moses in the bulrushes. In the earlier part of his reign his capital was Memphis. It was to Memphis that, after a little time, Moses was brought by Pharaoh's daughter.

So, we, too, set forth for Memphis.

We had been on our way for not more than a few minutes, when we were held up on the Ksar en Nil bridge by a crowd that stared down absorbedly into the water.

"What have they found now among the bulrushes?" I asked.

We got out and went to see. A boat was moored directly beneath us and a diver in his nightmare uniform was at that moment being lowered into the depths.

"What are they looking for?" I asked.

"The crown jewels of Pharaoh!" a wag said.

But even as I looked, another spectacle arrested my eyes. A felucca passed beneath us and in the centre of the deck a woman sat against an orange-crate. She sat quite still, unaware of the massed faces staring down from the bridge or the other feluccas on the river or the white buildings on the banks. She looked the more still and lonely, as there was another woman on the deck a few feet away from her, playing with a small boy, lifting him into the air and bringing him down again on to her raised knees.

I turned to Lucas. "I suppose they might have gone up to Memphis by felucca, too," I said.

"Who?"

"Pharaoh's daughter, when she came to claim Moses after his mother had weaned him. She was a kind woman. She let his mother take him as far as the palace gates, anyhow."

We rebuilt the boat and its furniture, for we recalled very vividly the equipment which Tutankhamen had provided to ferry himself across an even deeper and broader river.

The boat was built of blocks of acacia wood, with papyrus caulking the interstices, and the whole thing plated over with sheets of beaten gold. Pharaoh's daughter reclined on an ebony couch with her small feet resting on an upright panel of gold and ebony and ivory. The God Bes was there, embossed on each panel to protect her from evil spirits, should she drowse in the heat of the day under the spread veils of her palanquin. Behind her couch, two tall Nubians stood, fanning the air with gold-handled ostrich-feather fans. At her feet was a child's arm-chair of ebony inlaid with ivory, the arms of it covered with gold-leaf, and embossed with formal antelopes. But the child was not sitting there.

His mother had called him and he had gone over to her. She lifted him into the air and brought him down again on to her raised knees. Pharaoh's daughter looked down on them mournfully from her gold-and-ebony couch. . . .

Ibrahim was plucking urgently at my sleeve.

"Policeman!" he whispered. "No park on bridge! *Mish quais!* Not good!"

We were to discover that Ibrahim was more than normally sensitive to the displeasure of policemen.

"Pharaoh's daughter has gone!" I said. "We go too!"

So we crossed to the west side of the river, drove out beyond the Zoo through opulent modern suburbs, and leaving the Pyramids on our right hand, turned in alongside a canal, into the shade of eucalyptus and jacaranda trees. We had left Cairo and its works behind us, and were in a countryside which must have borne a very similar aspect when the small Moses was carried this way to become a princeling in Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh's henchmen then as now sowed and reaped these fields of wheat and broad beans, vetch and clover and maize, and the creamy bullocks dragged the blunt-pointed wooden ploughs through these rich fields. Then as now the naked serfs irrigated the black furrows with this same device—the *shaduf*, it is called—in which a leather bucket is balanced against a dried lump of mud, so that the bucket may be lowered empty to the water's level and raised full. The forbears of these children also sat on the canal-banks in costumes like orchards of plum and pomegranate, tearing each other's hair or holding out a hand for baksheesh. Donkeys like these padded delicately under the slung panniers of fodder, and goats like these nibbled the roots of the young trees. The white-billed wild duck fidgeted among the reeds of the pools, then as now. These works of damming and banking and bridge-making were going on then as now, as they have gone on through all the ages, and if the labourers were not of Moses' clan, they were far prisoners brought

back from campaigns in those regions whence the child's ancestors came and whether he was to lead them again.

As he grew up, the child was to become acquainted with many magical engines, and such an engine as we were driving in, that propelled itself with humming noises and without the aid of yoked beasts, would probably not have astonished him greatly. For the patron-saint of the city was Ptah, the blacksmith god, and he undoubtedly revealed his will through contraptions of similar ingenuity. But the child would have probably made excited noises and clapped his hands together in excitement at the strange spectacle of a camel—for the creature was to be a rare sight in Egypt for many centuries to come. And at one point so odd a parade of camels passed us that it was all we could do not to clap our hands together and make excited noises. First came a camel loping forward with six black kids slung together on his hump; then a camel twisting his neck round like a swan to chew at the green pyramid of fodder that half entombed him; then a camel bearing a *shaduf* as it were a gallows to an execution; last a camel bringing up the rear, with a bullock yoked on his right and a donkey tied on his left.

We were on the site of ancient Memphis now and had been for many miles, for the city was one of the vastest in the ancient world, and, despite the growth of Thebes, remained one of the chief cities of Egypt till the foundation of Alexandria drained its life-blood. For century upon century the Arab conquerors of Egypt used the titanic ruins of Memphis as a quarry for the building of their capital on the opposite side of the river. So well have the Nile and the Arab builders between them done their work that for miles upon miles within the circuit of the ancient city not a stone protrudes above the black soil. Then at last, when you reach the modern Arab village of Mit Rahineh and the palm-groves that stand about it, there are certain remembrancers of that old glory, a few rubbish-mounds humped amid the marsh-pools, the shapeless ruins of a few brick buildings, and certain stones more melancholy in their persistence here than they are in

their anonymous survival among the foundations of the mosques in Cairo.

Here at the heart of the city rose the temple of Ptah, its patron god, and the little that survives of identifiable ruin is identified with his name. There was a lustral basin before the outer courts, where the priests of the god washed the sacred vessels. The basin is now a formless depression where the seepage from the annual overflow welters. On the rim of this depression lie two colossal statues of Rameses, which once stood guarding the portals of Ptah's temple. Their vastness seems to reduce them to a nullity which would not afflict statues of a more modest size, and their duplication is like a great drum beaten once, and again a second time: Great Rameses is dead, Great Rameses is dead.

The larger of the colossi is now housed in a sort of concrete barn, and a gallery runs round the inner side from which you may gaze down on the lifeless thrust of the single mammoth thigh, the serene nothingness of the face, the frozen folly of the artificial beard bound upon the chin. So dead is he, he is less than the black mud which the water annually deposits in the margin of these palm-groves and the sun annually quickens into points of bright green wheat.

I stared longer than I know into the face of Rameses, retained on the gallery there by some hypnotic compulsion; I stared so long that at last the nothingness was invaded by a living light and shadow, the eyes became not so utterly unaware.

A small child of the Israelites had come up out of the river that day on a boat of acacia-wood plated with gold-leaf, though Rameses himself had declared: "Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river." His own daughter had brought him, whose image was graven upon his thigh.

And with the advent of the small child a murmuring arose out of the race of Israel, like the soughing of the wind among the bulrushes by the river: "Let the affliction cease, Rameses. Let the people go."

But the lips of Rameses lying in the cement barn are curled with disdain, and the nostrils are distended with it.

Your son shall grieve that you fathered him, Rameses, and his hosts shall be drowned in the deep sea. There shall remain not so much as one of them.

Beyond the prone statues of Rameses lie the hulking blocks of Ptah's temple, drums and bases and shattered cornices half in, half out, of the water, shapeless lumps of stone inscribed with the fastidiously shapely hieroglyphs. The water was less water than green scum, stirred now and again by a wagtail's wing or a Nile heron darting in its swift beak.

A small boy, or the voice of a small boy, moved about with us as we moved. The voice was sweet and mechanical, like the tinkle of a music-box, but it made words, as if rehearsing them to itself, like a parrot forgotten on a verandah. "How áre you? How áre you? How áre you?" Now the voice came from behind a leaning slab, now down from the boughs of a date-palm. "How áre you? How áre you?" Then, after an interval of silence, the words and tune changed, as if the parrot had just recalled another accomplishment. "Good morning. Very well. Good morning. Very well. Good morning. Very well."

Indifferent to Ptah and Rameses, to Jehovah and Moses, the villagers of Mit Rahîneh trod their fields or wrapped themselves in their dreams, leaning against the mud walls of their hovels. The boys ran up and down the palm-trees, with averted faces the girls went for water. Not even a sudden gunshot among the groves disturbed the peace long. The scattered birds came back to their feeding. As the echoes died, the wandering voice cried out across them sweetly: "How áre you? How áre you? How áre you?"

§ 2

Rameses the Second had a huge harem, and became the father of more than a hundred sons and more than fifty daughters. The favourite of them all was his daughter Bint-Anath, and the profile of her body down to her delicate

waist is incised on the granite flank of the smaller of her father's colossal images in Memphis. She is one of fifty sisters and more, yet it is impossible not to play with the idea that this is that very daughter who adopted the Hebrew child, all the more as her name indicates that her mother was of Semitic origin (for *bint* to this day means "girl" in Arabic). She cannot but have had a shrewd idea that the child in the ark was an Israelite, and the Semitic blood in her caused her to look on the tiny creature with an indulgent eye. She is carved on her father's statue with her right arm stretched across her breast and her curved fingers held upright beyond the left shoulder. It is purely a formal attitude, yet the mind goes on with its fancy. The child has arrived this day at the palace and she must now give him a name. There, she stands, with her fingers held pronouncing it.

"And she called his name Moses, and said, Because I drew him out of the water."

The name as written in the Hebrew text is actually "Moshéh," a word which has some resemblance to the Hebrew word "maashaah," to draw out. It is clear that the Bible chronicler prefers to assign a Hebrew rather than an Egyptian origin to the name of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, but as a matter of philological fact the name is probably derived from the Egyptian "Mosi"—that is, "born"—as in the name "Thutmosi," the god Thoth is born. The talmudic chronicler goes further than the text in Exodus. He extends the idea of the act of "drawing" from the Princess to Moses himself. Moses received his name not only because the Princess drew him out of the water, but also because he himself was to draw Israel out of Egypt.

The fact, however, is clear enough: the Princess drew the child out of the water, and for that action she was not to go without reward. For, the Jewish commentary tells us, when Moses was brought to Pharaoh's house, the Lord turned to the Princess and said: "Moses was not thy son, yet thou

didst take him to be so. Therefore I will call thee My daughter, though thou art not My daughter," and so thereafter she bore the name "Bithiah," which means, "the daughter of God," and at the end of her days was permitted to enter Paradise alive.

One further interpretation, not less fantastic, might be added here, the one provided by Josephus, the Jewish historian, in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, a book finished about the year A.D. 93 "Hereupon it was," he writes, "that Thermuthis"—that is his name for Pharaoh's daughter—"imposed this name Mouses upon him, from what had happened when he was put in the river; for the Egyptians call water by the name of *Mo*, and such as are saved out of it by the name of *Uses*, so by putting these two together, this imposed this name upon him."

It has been said earlier that the Bible text itself gives us no information regarding the upbringing and career of Moses between the moment when Jochebed, his mother, delivered him into the hands of Pharaoh's daughter and the day "when Moses was grown up" and his tremendous history began. Yet we can, in fact, build up some sort of a picture for ourselves of those veiled years. In the first place we have accepted a framework in time and space; in time we begin with the reign of Rameses the Second, in space, with the city of Memphis. Then we can fill in the framework with glowing colour and enchanting story from several sources. First and foremost, we have the Haggadah, the post-Biblical folk lore of the Jews contained in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature. This folk lore is a commentary on the Bible under the twofold aspects of story and precept. It took shape between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, and the rabbis for the most part created it, or at least wrote it down. But it cannot even now be said that the last legend in this folk lore has been invented, for despite its enormous documentation it remains a living and a fluid thing, and I can recall tales or versions of tales told by my father, or by

the other greybeards who were his contemporaries, which the doctors of this subject have not been able to refer to their sources.

It is chiefly the Talmud, then, as it is simplest to call it, which can be drawn upon for the "veiled" years. Then there is the work to which reference has just been made, the *Antiquities of the Jews*, by Josephus, who, it has been suggested, had access to passages, and perhaps whole chapters, of the Bible, of which no trace has been left in the surviving versions familiar to us. Reference should also be made to the *Life of Moses*, written by Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, who was born some twenty years before our era.

Both the Talmud and Josephus tell of an anxious moment in the child's history, about a year after Bithiah brought him to her father's palace, when he was two years old. (We must ourselves decide on one name rather than another for Pharaoh's daughter, seeing that the Bible does not name her for us.) Pharaoh was at dinner in his banquet-hall with his queen on his right hand and his daughter on his left, dandling the child on her knee. Below the great dais sat the princes and counsellors ranged about the lesser tables. And it chanced that the pretty twinkling things in Pharaoh's crown attracted the child's eye and he put out his hands to the crown and lifted it from Pharaoh's head and placed it on his own. Pharaoh's face went black, and there was great consternation among the princes and counsellors.

"What evil thing is this?" cried Pharaoh. "What evil thing does it portend?"

And there was a great wagging together of those false crimped beards, and at length Balaam, the wise man, arose and spoke, as he arises to speak through every stage of the legendary history of Moses.

"This is no child of Egypt, oh Pharaoh, whom thy daughter has brought into thy house. This is none other than the Hebrew child concerning whom my Master dreamed a dream, and this is the brand which would consume thy house with flame, and the wind which would fan the burning



THANK-OFFERING

of it. Therefore, that the danger be averted, let the counsellors take counsel together. Let them determine whether the sapling shall not at once be uprooted, that the peril shall not grow and fill all the heavens with darkness."

So it was that all the counsellors were summoned, and the angel Gabriel came disguised as one of them. And this was the counsel that the angel Gabriel gave:

"If it seem good to Pharaoh, let a platter of jewels be set before the child, and a platter of live coals. And if he reach out his hand and take the jewels, then it shall be known that he hath done with wisdom all that he hath done, and he shall be slain therefor. But if he stretch out his hand and take the coal, then it shall be known it was without wisdom he did the thing, and he shall live."

And it was done so. And the child, seeing the platter of jewels and the platter of live coals before him, reached forth his hand to take the jewels, but the angel Gabriel thrust his hand sideward towards the live coals, and he lifted them and burnt his lips and his tongue, for which reason he was all his life long of slow speech and diffident in his address.

And so was the child spared, and Bithiah, his foster-mother, took him in her arms again and covered with kisses his shining face.

Even at the age, Josephus tells us, when he was but three years old, God gave him "that tallness as was wonderful; and for his beauty, there was nobody so unpolite as, when they saw him, they were not greatly surprised at his countenance: nay, it happened frequently that those that met him as he was carried along the road, were obliged to turn again upon seeing the child; that they left what they were about, and stood still a great while to look on him; for the beauty of the child was so remarkable."

Philo in his *Life of Moses* expands the picture a little. As the child grew up, he was more than merely tall and handsome. He was a studious and thoughtful lad, who learned from Egyptian masters mathematics, music and philosophy,

from Chaldean masters astronomy and from Assyrian masters letters. Finally, expensive Greek masters were introduced—a good many centuries prematurely—to teach him rhetoric and logic. A more authentic scripture is less circumstantial. We learn in the seventh chapter of Acts that he was “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.”

What was the place, then, where Moses acquired this wisdom? Where would a young patrician be sent in the time of Rameses the Second to study under the best masters? There is little difficulty in answering the question. He would be sent to one of the two great religious centres, for the priesthood had the monopoly of all learning; either to Thebes, in Upper Egypt, or to Annu, in Lower Egypt, or Heliopolis, to give it the name it is usually known by. And seeing that Rameses was at this time probably living in his palace in Memphis, the boy would doubtless have been sent to Heliopolis, which was adjacent, some eighteen miles down the river. Heliopolis was the chief shrine of Ra, the Sun-God. It would there be stressed on the young Moses that he who had been adopted by a Pharaoh’s daughter owed an especial devotion to Ra, who was the progenitor of the Pharaohs, the “Children of the Sun,” as their very name implied.

By his own people the place was called “On,” a shortening of the Egyptian “Annu.” Contact had once before been established between On and the people of Israel in an earlier generation, for it is written concerning Joseph that Pharaoh “gave him to wife Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah, priest of On.” But it was not an association that gave pleasure to the people of Israel, still less to the Prophets; and Jeremiah, writing six centuries later, loudly raised his voice against On, or “Beth-Shemesh,” as he called it, the House of the Sun: “He shall break also the images of Beth-Shemesh, that is in the land of Egypt; and the houses of the gods of the Egyptians he shall burn with fire.”

From the pagan writers, however, we can build a calmer picture of the qualifications of Heliopolis, considered rather

as a university than a home of abominations. Herodotus tells us the priests were the finest historians in Egypt, and all the royal records were preserved in its archives. The schools of philosophy and astronomy were of such distinction that the great Plato was among the students who attended them.

“To Heliopolis, Ibrahim!” I said.

It was a noble conjunction, I thought, Moses and Plato, the wisest of the eastern men and the wisest of the western. To Heliopolis, then, we journeyed, where, with a thousand years between them, Moses and Plato sat bowed for hours over enormous tomes and went out along the river to freshen their foreheads in the evening wind.

§ 3

It was impossible not to go through Cairo again on the journey from Memphis to Heliopolis. But we did not stay, and Professor Nesib, whether ghost or substance, made no effort to detain us. The University section of modern Cairo is no longer in Heliopolis, where the University section of ancient Memphis was, but south-westward, on the opposite bank. Heliopolis to-day is a smart suburb, without any of the dinginess of the central city, or any of its glamour. We were informed that most of its undertakings are in the hands of a private company, largely owned by some modern Joseph, who lives in a Gothic castle on the edge of the desert, more Gothic than anything on the Rhine or the Loire. There are beautiful villas and gardens and hotels in Heliopolis. An electric train runs out frequently. There is a race-course and an aerodrome. There are several cinemas. They seemed all to be showing Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times.” All the walls of Heliopolis were plastered with it—Modern Times, Modern Times, Modern Times . . . as if the private company wanted to make it quite clear there was no connection any more with the Ancient Times of Ra and Anubis, Osiris and Min.

We went into the Palmyrion Café Bar, for we had not

eaten for a good many hours. "Modern Times" plastered the inside walls. They were making a great clatter with coins at a little office in the corner. The Allenby horse-races were on that day in Heliopolis. We made a lesser clatter with coins, for we were hungry. But the staff was either at a matinée of "Modern Times" or putting its money on the two o'clock. There was a heap of golden oranges on a chair. We took three, and put down a coin on the table beside them, being payment at the day's market rate. But they were extremely bitter, being marmalade oranges, no doubt, so we ate little of them. At last a waiter came back from the horse-racing, or the matinée, and asked us what we desired. "Food!" we said. He brought us food. It was all sweet, all Syrian, sweeter than the marmalade oranges had been bitter. There was a flaky substance called Ghazl al Banat—Angel's Hair—compounded out of orange-flowers, sugar and nuts. It looked like scud and broke down into white dust. There was Halva, made with millet-seeds and honey. We thereon weakly asked for drink. They brought us, in cups, a nutty substance, thicker than any porridge, sweeter than honey, and placed before us three spices to sprinkle on it, cosbarra and erfa and kamun. We had a spoonful each of this, and then rose, feeling it was not likely we should be interested in food or drink for some days. We had had enough, we felt, of the modern times of Heliopolis. We continued the interrupted pilgrimage to its antiquity.

But we once more interrupted the journey, in a more fragrant halting-place, before we had covered the three thousand years that separated us from Ra and his pupil, Moses. The road took us through the village of Matariya, where a Tree and a Well are pointed out. It is said that the Virgin rested under that Tree during her flight to Egypt, and out of that Well drew the water with which she washed the Child's garments. It is further said that when she threw the water away, a rich crop of balsam-plants grew in that place. These grew for many centuries thereafter, and were

distilled into a fine oil, which was much prized for use in the baptismal font.

The garden where the Tree stands, or where an old tree stands in the same place, was very fresh and dewy that afternoon. There had been rain, so that the flowers looked like schoolchildren with their faces washed for a speech-day. We went alongside a low wall with a grove of oranges on our left, and came to a locked wooden gate. A small solemn girl stood there, to whom we said: "Open, please." "You pay before you come," the small girl said, which we did, and entered. Clover grew in the meadow, flowers in the banks, palms and firs and eucalyptus throughout the whole garden. The Tree itself is within a round, walled enclosure, with many spicy shrubs growing about it, and tall date-palms leaning down. It is anything between two and three hundred years old and is stated to be a sycamore, but is, in fact, an Arabian fig, *gemez*. Much of it is now a mass of dead, gnarled branches joined in a tortuous tangle, grey-white like wind-swept rock. But one huge arm thrusts itself from the stony confusion, and waves its leaves and wears its fruit with an air, and will do so for generations to come. From many of the knobs and stumps coloured rags hang fluttering, torn from their garments and tied here by the sick folk of these parts who come to cure their ailments by the grace of this Tree. We learned that Muslim as well as Christian sufferers repair here, and as we moved off from the enclosure, we saw a veiled woman steal in the shadow of the wall towards the Tree, as if she hoped thus to evade her Prophet's eye.

The Pharaonic well the Virgin used for the Child's garments has been renovated since, though the maidenhair that may have grown there then still grows in its crevices. A discarded *shaduf* stands near, but an electric pump has lately been installed to raise the water which still irrigates the sacred balsam-plants. Over the well sweep the vanes of a huge banana-tree, and a little further away, beyond a plot of soft green grass, an arbour wreathed over with an ancient grape-vine condenses the shade. The mother of the small

girl who had opened the gate sat on a rug of black goat-hair laid down on the plot of grass. The small girl was away somewhere, but the woman had a babe beside her leaning against her thigh. On the rug at her right hand was a heap of maize she had been shelling. But she seemed tired, and her head had fallen on to her breast. A little further away a black ass was grazing in the wet clover. Doves cooed in the tops of the trees.

All that remains of ancient Heliopolis is a single red granite obelisk, which the Pharaoh Sesostris the First set before the Temple of Ra. We had asked several people in the newer Heliopolis which was the way to the obelisk, but they said there was no cinema there of that name. We found, however, that it was only one mile distant from the Virgin's Tree. We set forth under avenues of acacia and tamarisk, through fields of corn and clover, and before long came upon it, with a little iron fence round it, and a cement pit about its base. There was a companion obelisk to it once, but that was thrown down long ago, and this remains the sole obelisk in all Egypt still standing where the builder set it up. The sky was now quite free of clouds and the monument rose very pure and lovely against the intense air. In the place of Ra's colonnades and courts a tiny mud village scrabbled among the bases of the date-palms. A bullock pushed a wooden plough through the easy earth, and a cloud of Nile herons followed in the wake of the turned earth. Three little girls got up from among the rows of broad beans, in an orange and a blue and a sunflower gown, and followed each other solemnly round and round the base of the obelisk. A goatherd leaned up against the railings. He had left his herd grazing a little distance away, but he held in his arms a tiny black kid, and now and again pulled its long silky ears. The creature bleated from time to time, but seemed well content.

There had been much idolatry of beasts in this place once . . . the cow sacred to Hathor, the jackal sacred to

Anubis, the bull sacred to Apis, each with his retinue of priests, the embalmers for his mummy, the great granite sarcophagus where it might rest for all time. There was no more left of that old worship than the goatherd under the obelisk, snuggling a tiny black kid upon his lap.

We turned and looked upon that obelisk for the last time. Above its pinnacle, flickering in the triumph of his brief day, a living falcon hovered on outstretched wings. Below the pinnacle, topmost of the descending line of hieroglyphs in which Sesostris rehearsed his dignities, a falcon with folded wings is carved in profile. The dead bird was more alive than the living one. Somehow, that obelisk told more eloquently what Egypt was than all the marching magnificence of the pillars of Thebes, even though it stood—or because it stood—so solitary, outlined against the blue air.

§ 4

It was St. Stephen testifying before the Sanhedrin who said regarding Moses that he was “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” and it was likelier that Moses acquired that learning in Heliopolis than elsewhere. The saint goes on to say Moses was “mighty in words and deeds,” and then, but only then, being “full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel.”

In other words, Moses had already in some theatre displayed his might. The Bible as it survives says not a word of the matter. From the chapter in Acts quoted above it can be inferred either that the writer had access to some scripture now lost to us or that he was referring to some obstinate legend surviving to his own day. Josephus and the Talmud answer the question quite fully. It was in Abyssinia that Moses displayed his might in deeds, if not in words, and if the accounts of his actual campaign in that country bear a strongly legendary stamp, it seems reasonable to accept for two reasons the general idea that Moses went fighting in the outer lands.

In the first place, if Moses was brought up as a prince in Pharaoh's court, he would be expected, after his education was completed, to fight Pharaoh's wars, like his brother princes, in one part or another of Pharaoh's empire. We know as a matter of fact that Rameses the Second had a great deal of trouble on the border territories during various periods of his reign, and that the danger became most menacing on the fringes of the Delta; so much so that the whole pivot of his interests gradually moved northward. He probably began his royal career in Thebes; from Thebes he moved to Memphis, and from Memphis he was forced to move still further north to the city of Tanis in the seaward reaches of the Delta. Early in his reign he conducted a fierce fifteen-year-long campaign against the Hittites in Asia Minor, in which he distinguished himself by his personal bravery. A Libyan campaign on the west of the Delta is vaguely referred to in the inscriptions. There is some evidence that as early as the second year of his reign there was trouble in the southward region vaguely called Ethiopia, the land of the dark people, and that the trouble broke out again more than once. Rameses himself does not seem to have gone south, but he may well have imposed on the young man, Moses, a military mission which was not attractive to himself and may have seemed positively repugnant to the other princes. If Moses combined with the great-heartedness the Bible assigns to him, the personal beauty we read of in the legends, Rameses may have found him so popular that the further he could send him away, the more it suited him. There have been instances nearer to our own times of captains sent by their leaders to the last outposts of their country, because they have fought so bravely and the common people loved them too well.

There is another reason why one is disposed to accept the idea that Moses went campaigning in Abyssinia. The person with whom the Bible narrative makes us familiar is not only a great lawgiver but a great soldier. A military writer who not long ago attempted a new elucidation of the route of the

Exodus actually invests in him the accumulated virtues of all the great British commanders.

"There was a touch of Cromwell," he writes, "in his seizing the Tabernacle and pitching it outside the camp. The tenacity of Wellington; the devotion of Gordon; the virility of Roberts and Plumer; the equanimity of Haig, were all components of his leadership."

It can certainly be said of him that he knew how to handle great masses moving through strange and difficult country, and country so varied in terrain as the deserts of Sinai and the high upland plateaux of Transjordan. If there is any truth in the Abyssinian story, he would have gained experience as a young man which would have stood him in good stead in later years. In the Danakil desert which a later war was to make a familiar sound in modern ears, he would have had a foretaste of the deserts of Sin and Paran. The walls of the Abyssinian uplands rise as abruptly from the plains as the Transjordan massif from the Dead Sea depression, and the uplands are broken by just such colossal fissures as the Wadi el Hasa and the Wadi Mojib.

Josephus is at pains to point out that in descending on the enemy, Moses "did not march by the river but by land," and so surprised them greatly. That was a manœuvre imitated three thousand years later by the force despatched to the rescue of General Gordon in Khartoum, which with the same end in view cut off the great loop of the river at Korti and marched straight across the desert to rejoin the Nile at Metemma. There the similarity between the campaigns ceases. Moses found his path barred by a region swarming with serpents "such as are worse than others in power and mischief, and of an unusual fierceness in sight, some of which ascend out of the ground unseen, and also fly in the air, and so come upon men unawares, and do them a mischief."

It was at that point that he invented a wonderful stratagem to preserve the army safe, and without hurt; for "he made baskets like unto arks, of sedge, and filled them with ibes,

and carried them along with them; which animal is the greatest enemy to serpents imaginable, for they fly from them when they come near them; and as they fly they are caught and devoured by them. So he let loose the ibes, and by their means repelled the serpentine kind, and used them for his assistants before the army came upon that ground." So it was he overthrew their cities "and made a great slaughter of these Ethiopians."

The campaign, however, was not quite finished yet. For the enemy fell back to the royal city of Saba, which, with its ramparts and its girdle of rivers, seemed for a long time quite impregnable. And then, one morning, Tharbis, the king's daughter, happening to look over the battlements of the city, beheld the beauty and courage of Moses and fell deeply in love with him; "and upon the prevalency of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him about their marriage." He thereupon accepted the offer, on condition she would procure the delivery up of the city. The agreement was made and took effect immediately. "And when Moses had cut off the Ethiopians, he gave thanks to God, and consummated his marriage, and led the Egyptians back to their own land."

Miriam (Ex:2:15:32)

That Moses did, in fact, have an Ethiopian wife is stated by the Bible itself, if the word "Cush" is the Hebrew equivalent of Ethiopia, as is generally believed. (It is most devoutly believed among the negroes of America, who take great pride in the thought that the Lawgiver took himself a wife out of the ~~black~~ people.) In the twelfth chapter of Numbers we read: "And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: for he had married a Cushite woman." The woman may well have been this Tharbis, for though it has been contended that the text indicates the marriage was recent, the opposite seems likelier. It is far more probable that he would have married an alien woman before rather than after he was called to the leadership of Israel. The trouble with Miriam and Aaron may

have been smouldering for years before it broke out; family situations of that sort are not infrequent.

But whether Tharbis was or was not the Cushite woman, Moses had displayed his might in deeds, the war was over, "and Moses led the Egyptians back to their own land."

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

WHITHER did Moses lead his triumphant army, if army there was, if triumph there was? Rameses may still have been in residence in Memphis at that time, he may already have transferred his residence to the great northern city of Tanis, which stood on the Tanitic branch of the Nile delta, about twenty miles from the sea.

The city was already one of great antiquity when Rameses took up his residence there. He himself, in his own monuments, spoke of the place as Pi-Rameses, the House of Rameses. The name, Tanis, by which it is generally spoken of, is actually its classical Greek name. The ancient Egyptians called it Sekhet Tcha or Sekhet Tchant, and the symbols that composed its hieroglyph contain an indication of special interest to us—namely, that it was a place where “foreigners” lived. These “foreigners” were the forerunners of those Israelitic folk who came up from beyond the Asian border some time during the occupation of Egypt by the Semitic Hyksos, or Shepherd, Kings, and were to depart again in circumstances later chronicled in a momentous scripture.

Sekhet Tchan is rendered in the Bible into “Field of Zoan,” and the Psalmist definitely establishes it as the place where, according to the Hebrew belief, Moses was charged to assail with his flail of plagues the hard heart of Pharaoh in his palace. The Psalmist grieves that the children of Israel “remembered not His hand, nor the day when He delivered them from the enemy; how He had wrought His signs in Egypt, and His wonders in the *field of Zoan*.” The “wonders,” as he proceeds at once to explain, were the ten plagues. But damaging though they were, Zoan was not entirely wiped out. The Hebrews were still aware of a Zoan large enough and wicked enough many centuries later to

provoke the anathema of Ezekiel: "And I will make Pathros desolate, and will set fire in Zoan."

It is stated in Exodus that the Israelites built for Pharaoh "store-cities, Pithom and Raamses." It is an inevitable deduction, at least on the part of many of those who believe that the Bible narrative contains the essence of the historic truth of the matter, that the store-city, Raamses, is identical with the delta capital of Rameses the Second, Pi-Rameses, known also to us as Zoan or Tanis.

It had still one other name, which, among this multiplicity of names, must be quoted here. The researches of the distinguished scholar now actually at work among the ruins of Tanis, Professor Montet of Strasbourg, seem to corroborate the view that on this same site the detested Hyksos Kings, after razing the city of their predecessors to the ground, built their own capital, which they called Avaris. It is possible their work of capturing the town and the region was facilitated by those "foreigners" whose existence is indicated in the name, Sekhet Tchant. After the expulsion of the Hyksos, Avaris was in its turn razed to the ground, its name was expunged from all record, and the desolate ruins became Sekhet Tchant again. The place remained desolate for centuries, so abominable was the memory of the Hyksos. Yet the site had been before, and once again became, one of great military importance, owing to the dangers that threatened on the Libyan and Asian frontiers. Moreover at that time the region, which is now quite derelict, was rich and fertile, and deep down beneath the sand that now blankets it Professor Montet has discovered traces of ancient fields and vineyards. Yet, despite that fertility, it was not till Rameses the Second of the Nineteenth Dynasty that the long taboo was broken. There are no traces, among the ruins, of the kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty, though they were mighty builders; and even Seti the First, second King of the Nineteenth Dynasty and father of this Rameses, appears only once, and in a monument for which his son is responsible.

There seems to have been a psychological as well as a

military reason, as a consequence of which Rameses was able to break down the taboo. There was something Asian in the character of Rameses, in his delicacy, his sensuality, his love of ostentation, though these characteristics were anything but unknown among the other Pharaohs. He had a natural affinity for Asia. Asia was his spiritual home. It is believed he spent his boyhood there, as his grandfather was governor of what would now be called the Kantara region, on the Suez Canal. He married at least one and probably two Hittite princesses, and his favourite daughter was the girl Bint-Anath, who, in a fit of nostalgia, may well have adopted an Asiatic child to be her son.

It was Rameses the Second, then, who came to the place of ruins and built up the city again, and called it Pi-Rameses. The labour to hand would be provided by a later army of those "foreigners" whose existence is commemorated in the city's name. The "foreigners" would clearly be Asiatics, for the place was on the fringes of Asia. What is more reasonable than that they should be those very "foreigners," the Israelites, who, in their records, have perpetuated the building for Pharaoh of a store-city, by name Raamses? It is said they "built" rather than "rebuilt" a city, but Avaris had been so laid waste that one word would suit as well as the other.

The conclusion was driven in upon us irresistibly. Following the steps of Moses, it was to Tanis and to no other city we were impelled to journey now. We had not gone to Abyssinia, because, with all the respect due to Josephus and the mediæval tale-tellers, such an expedition would have been rather on the level of fantasy than piety. Of the journey to Memphis and Heliopolis, too, we knew we could say nothing more than this, that seeing Moses must have spent those "veiled" years somewhere, it is more plausible that he spent them there than elsewhere. But the case was quite different with Tanis. Zoan was Tanis. To Zoan-Tanis Moses was sent to be the agent of the Lord's "wonders," which were wrought in the Field there. He was sent as one of Jehovah's princes to Zoan-

Tanis, to the palace of Pharaoh, where he had once been one of Pharaoh's princes.

The time was, in fact, at hand when we were to leave the steps of a false Egyptian to follow in the steps of the greatest Israelite. Somewhere at some time there must have come upon his spirit a sudden thunder and lightning, a sudden pity, a sudden sense of his sublime vocation; so that, leaving behind him the colossal pomp, the bull-god and the hawk-god, the incense and the frozen mumbo-jumbo, "he went out unto his brethren." It was from the palace of Rameses in the store-city of Raamses he went out. It was the Field of Zoan he went out to, which is now called by the people who still live in those parts "San el Hagar," San of the Stones.

"To Tanis, Ibrahim!" I said.

Ibrahim looked puzzled.

"To Tanis!" I said again.

Ibrahim looked embarrassed. He has for some years transported all over Egypt travellers religious and irreligious, scholarly and ignorant, but he has transported none of any sort to Tanis.

We examined our maps. Some admitted the existence of a place called Tanis, others did not.

"What about San el Hagar?" asked Lucas. "Perhaps he knows it by that name."

"Yes," I repeated. "San el Hagar. San that is Tanis that is Zoan that is Tchant." I stopped, for I was deeply moved. It seemed very poignant to me that this tiny fisher village of which the field-labourers twenty miles away may not have heard, should have a name that thrusts back under millennial debris through such vast cycles of history towards such august beginnings.

"To San el Hagar, Ibrahim!" I said.

But he did not know that either. So we said he would have to drive north and east to Zagazig, and Allah would take us further.

We left for Tanis next morning and came out soon upon a

road by a canal. We were going into the delta country proper where it is not possible to travel long or far without coming on to a road by a canal. The snow-white Nile herons were perched along the banks at regular intervals gazing intently into the water, like French fishermen with their little baskets beside them. Now and again a heron darted his beak into the scum, like a fisherman striking. The birds are protected, for they are evidently invaluable scavengers. They dapple the whole of the green delta like clumps of marguerite. An English tea-planter on the train from Alexandria insisted they were egrets, but we were sceptical. In Cairo a Coptic car salesman said they were ibises, and were worshipped by his ancestors. And certainly, judging from the way in which, to avoid hitting one, Ibrahim swerved the car aside and nearly landed us in a canal, we felt that there was still an almost exaggerated respect for the creature. But we were sceptical, none the less, that it was an ibis. Its legs were not long enough. A French mining engineer said it was called "héron garde-de-bœuf," because it perches on the backs of cattle, where it goes excavating for ticks. But we saw the birds perched everywhere excepting on the backs of cattle. We called them Nile herons finally, for they both looked and behaved like that.

It was a more than usually amphibious world we travelled in that morning. It chanced that we were entering the delta country during the year's annual draining of the canals, which goes on for about a week. Naked men standing waist-high in mud and water were cleaning out the culverts or, sprawling half-way up the slopes, were strengthening the embankments with mud and stone. The roads were being sluiced down with buckets of water raised by *shadufs*. Boys were dragging the bottoms with hand fishing-nets or stretching wider nets from bank to bank to catch the fish as they floundered miserably in search of the comfort of deeper water. Here and there, between the rows of fishing herons, the women, with their loose black gowns trailing in the water, stood on the water-side, screwing up and beating and spreading out their under-

GATHERING OF THE HOST



clothes. The field animals, too, were in on the watery picnic. We saw two naked urchins washing down a calf much blonder than themselves, another was washing out a donkey's eyes with a damp piece of cloth. Bullocks, wallowing like hippopotami, were being scrubbed down with great coarse scrubbing-brushes.

Between the canals extended fields bursting with their juices like too-ripe greengages. We got down at a roadside market that spilled its wares over into an adjacent field. Oranges and tangerines were twenty for a piastre, or about twopence-halfpenny, and eggs were nearly as cheap. We added to our store a whole bough of bananas for a few piastres. It was not to be wondered at, I thought, that the lean Asiatics prowling in their sandy penury beyond Sinai ached to come in on all this fatness. The sellers squatting over their fruit and greenstuff, sweetmeats and finery, looked up at us a little suspiciously as we walked among their laden baskets. So the Israelites must have felt when they first came up from Canaan, and appeared in the markets of the native fellahs, and marvelled at all this richness. A little further on, we sat down by the edge of a canal to eat our luncheon. A small girl in pink came skipping up the roadway, till she suddenly caught sight of us and at once scuttled shivering behind a tree, fearful of what alien magics we trousered infidels might spread upon the surrounding air. Little Ibrahim, moon-faced and solicitous, sought to reassure her, but though he wore a tarbush, he wore also trousers. Then, fortunately, a good man came up on a donkey, his feet straddled over two sacks of clover. The donkey ambled along as it pleased. The good man had his nose buried in the Koran, from which he was reciting verses under his breath. Little Ibrahim ventured to disturb him, and said there was a small girl in pink behind a tree who did not dare to enter the infected orbit of the *rumi*. So the good man went back and spoke to the small girl, who thereon emerged from behind the tree. She seized the good man by the ankle, he with his free foot found a place in the donkey's body to kick at and the donkey lifted up its legs

and trotted off smartly. So the small girl, with head averted, passed the place where the *rumi* were, and no harm came to her.

We had by this time left Zagazig, where we proposed to spend that night, an hour or two's journey behind us, and were well on our way to the large village of Faqûs. Our general direction was still north and east, towards the vague margin of the great salt Lake Manzala this side of Port Said. It was simple to direct Ibrahim as far as Faqûs, the roads were well enough marked on the map and they were in a fairly decent condition. But it was not at all so simple to direct him out of it. In the first place, the authorities abruptly suspended their interest in the road at that point. From Faqûs onward, it was not easy to decide which was road, which was field, which was village. In the second place, the interest of the canal authorities, as opposed to the road authorities, suddenly attained a pitch of frenzy at Faqûs. Bridges were blocked up, canals were rendered quite impassable by huge mounds of mud or stone. Round and round circled poor Ibrahim, seeking an egress from Faqûs with no more success than a beetle seeking to find its way out from under an up-ended tumbler. Now and again a heavily-armed policeman took a hand at the game, but after a time he grew dizzy and dropped off. (There were armed posts at every bridge and cross-roads to see that unauthorized civilians did not succeed in simplifying the problems in transport which the authorities had so laboriously created.) It must have been during this period of the circumvallation of Faqûs that our store of petrol was so seriously diminished as to cause us acute anxiety later. The sweat was pouring vigorously down Ibrahim's cheeks. He was lifting off his tarbush and replacing it above his left eye with the rapidity of an automaton. At last, so far as I can reconstruct it, Ibrahim shut his eyes and pressed the accelerator and just drove. It seemed the only way left to disentangle us from the labyrinth of Faqûs. We crested an earthwork or two, tottered for a moment or two on the brink

of a steep embankment, and found ourselves at last disembarrassed of Faqûs and headed, as we hoped, for Tanis.

But the going was not easy. So far as there was a road at all, it was very bumpy, and that slowed us down. We were also slowed down by the fact that this seemed the only road in commission in these parts, and every camel and bullock and donkey for miles round was sauntering along it. This went on for two hours or more, while the landscape remained predominantly green, with a veining of black gashes of canal. Then the green began to peter out and the brown sand to seep in. The animals became sparser, too. The camels and the bullocks ceased. A few donkeys shuffled along, under loads of man and fodder three times their size.

It was late afternoon now. A glow burnished the sunward flanks of trees and field-crops, which now became coarser and harder as the ground they were rooted in became less hospitable. Roots became more visible, thrusting out laterally in the hopes of moisture denied them below. The groves of palms thinned down into single stragglers. The guttering green flame of the crops was snuffed out. We were unthreaded out of the network of delta canals. Only one canal—the canal we coasted on our left hand—remained of it. But it was broader than the others, and there was more and freer water in it, as if it was not so amenable to being combed and cabined, to being dealt out like soup in ladlefuls. It was not mere inland water any longer, all its veins clotted after the vast journey from the Abyssinian uplands. It had its own secret relations with the Mediterranean store. On either side the leagues of brown sand rippled to the sandy marshes and the sea.

It seemed probable that this was that canal we had read of, the Canal de Moueys, which occupies the bed where once the Tanitic branch of the Nile flowed. If that was so, we were right for the village of San el Hagar and the ruins of Tanis, though we had reached here rather by luck than by map-reading. Our maps made less than a half-hearted attempt to grapple with this problem of roads and canals.

It certainly did not seem to be of much interest to the Automobile Club of Egypt, who saw no reason why people should want to nose along into such outlandish parts. The peasants of whom we asked the way knew as little about modern Sal el Hagar as about ancient Tanis. One pointed east across the desert, another pointed west. Another pointed vaguely forward. "Five kilometres," he said. "It may be more."

We continued along the canal-side road, though it never had been a road, and soon ceased to be a track. Ibrahim was fidgeting a great deal with his tarbush. He was getting anxious about his petrol. He not merely had to get to San el Hagar, he had to get back again all the long way to Zagazig. It had been the original intention to leave ourselves at least enough daylight to negotiate the difficult canal region so far as Faqûs. But we had long ago given up that hope. And now not only time but petrol was running short. We had used up far more of both in getting here than we had counted on. Even if we were right for San el Hagar, it was extremely unlikely we could fill up there, and we might well be stranded anywhere in this sandy waste on the way back. And perhaps we were not even right for San el Hagar? If we were not, sooner or later the sands would soften down into thick marsh. We would be by so many kilometres further from Faqûs, by so much the surer of a cold comfortless night, for which we had made no provision either with covering or food.

That was why Ibrahim was fidgeting with his tarbush, as we devoured the long kilometres of sand and the short supply of fuel.

"Well?" Ibrahim turned round to Lucas and me in the back of the car, his eyes dewy with appeal.

"Well?" I asked Lucas.

"Well?" Lucas asked me.

"We go on," we said unanimously, but without optimism.

We agreed that if we got to Tanis a cramped night in the car would be worth risking. But would we get to Tanis?

The canal beside us might be, or it might not be, the one-time Tanitic branch of the Nile. Whatever it was, no two maps agreed on giving it the same name. Moreover, the old stream might have split up into more than one watercourse. It was all rather disquieting.

“Keep going, Ibrahim!” I said through shut teeth. I turned to Lucas. “I wonder——” I started.

“Yes?”

“Do you think, that after ten minutes, if there isn’t any sign——”

“Yes,” said Lucas. “After ten minutes.”

We extended the ten to fifteen minutes, and saw at the fourteenth, under a long russet cloud ahead of us, three slender strokes that outlined themselves against the violet sky.

“What can they be?” I asked.

“The masts of feluccas, surely!” said Lucas.

And sure enough they were. That panel of molten brass was not brass, it was water, with the sunset blazing on it. Two or three kilometres ahead, the canal opened out into a small roadstead. As we crested a sand-dune, we saw squat buildings of grey brick, we saw palms, we saw a sheikh’s white tomb among the palms.

“We’re there!” cried Jim delightedly, smacking his thighs.

Ibrahim turned and flashed a smile at us, then turned again, as the wheel was nearly wrenched out of his hands.

“We’re there!” echoed Lucas.

“Are we?” I asked. “Are we?”

The canal had swerved eastward, and we with it. Once more we crested a dune and a new skyline east by south was visible. Along a high ridge of sand a narrow-gauge line ran. There were several stationary trucks along the line and a crane-like shaft stuck up rawly a little distance beyond it. A vivid memory flashed into my mind of a sudden descent I had once made on the Basque coast east of Bilbao, to exactly such a scene as this—a narrow-gauge line, and trucks, and a mine-shaft sticking up. It was, in fact, some sort of a mine—copper it may have been.

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"We've gone wrong!" I said, sick with chagrin. "We should have turned back earlier!"

At this moment the door of the car opened and was banged to again. It was Ibrahim running for all he was worth.

"Where are you going?" I cried.

"Benzine!" he shouted, running faster, as if there were a pestilence about and our only hope was to get away from it in as few seconds as possible.

"That's San el Hagar!" Lucas said quietly.

"It's not!" I was quite peevish. "They're digging something!"

"Yes. They're digging something," he agreed. "Come on! Let's waste no more daylight!"

"All right!"

We got out and made towards the mine-shaft. We had some two or three hundred yards to cover. The soft sand came ankle-deep. It was heavy going.

The ridge was perhaps some forty feet high, but it sloped quite gradually, so that the beauty of the scene that was shortly to be unfolded before us burst on us quite suddenly the moment we reached the top of the ridge. The experience had something in common with the raising of the curtain at a theatre, except that that takes place slowly, and this happened in one incredible moment. One moment there was nothing against our eyes but pock-marked troughs and tussocky weals of sand. The next there was light, space, movement, colour, history fused into incandescent presentness.

I cannot say now whether I did in fact expect it, or did not expect it, to be Tanis that would lie revealed under my eyes, when we got to the top of the ridge. I was put out, I suppose, by the humdrum appearance of those trucks and that shaft, though if I had paused to think a moment I would not have expected to find active excavation going on without machinery to excavate with. But the first impact of the thing I saw from the top there, though it was uniquely beautiful, was moral rather than æsthetic.

It was a ruin, or a vast array of ruin, in process of excava-

tion. It was, and could be nothing else than, Tanis. But in that first moment I realized it was more than the thing I had understood by that word. It was the hulk of a city, as noble as any but two or three that the Pharaohs of Egypt built, a city which only by the caprice of history has not the glamour or celebrity of Memphis or Thebes, though of the first less remains, and the second is not more ancient. But it had been a city great enough to be the capital of the great Rameses; and in a sudden illumination of the towering odds against the Israelite, the mind was aware of how sublime the daring of Moses was, challenging these gods, that stood upright on their bases then, under the titan walls of Tanis.

The walls and the gods were fallen now, huge chunks of their substance lying scattered in the great space below our feet. The space had now been so broadened and deepened, and the uncovered ruins were now so grandiose, that the eye could speedily divine it gazed not merely on one city, but on several, of which the borders were not coterminous either in time or space. We knew we were standing on the top of the ramparts of the old city. The vast hollow below heaved with light, as if the sun on its passage across the heavens had spilled it like a shower of rain, and it could find no egress among the dunes that banked it in, where it could join the main stream of day that tumbled over the western bars. Excavation was proceeding in two main centres, one some little distance to the right of us and the other on the hillside opposite, across the amphitheatre. The same thing was happening in each. A long line of girls moved downhill, and disappeared from our view into a deep pit. A long line of girls issued from the pit and moved uphill. They balanced baskets on their heads, empty as they went down, full as they came up. In their balance and the archaic fullness of their dresses they were like a Greek frieze, excepting that they substituted for the immobile horizontal prolongation of a frieze, an oblique movement in an endless chain up and down the sand-dune. But the colour, I think, was something more than Greek; I might have said it was Florentine colour, excepting that the

light gilding the bronzy feet and faces, the light stretching sheets of massed sunflowers across the vast canvas of the sand-dune, was of the quality that no artist could ever hope to extract out of pigment. The dresses themselves were of such colours, arranged in such a sequence, as Fra Angelico might have devised—ochre and terracotta, yellow, amber, scarlet, black, cherry, plum, maroon, turquoise, hyacinth-blue. There was, I repeat, something of theatre about the spectacle. Reinhardt in a megalomaniac mood might have dreamed of such a setting, which Hollywood with all its millions could not have built for him. The antiphonal movements of the two groups of women, each on its own hill, was like a ballet which Diaghilev might have arranged on some more generous planet than this.

It was not till several minutes after we reached the top of the dune that a figure emerged from a sort of foreman's hut a little distance on our left. The figure, as I was to learn shortly, was that of M. Montet, Professor at the University of Strasbourg, and the scholar in charge of the present excavations in Tanis. He must have seen us coming up the hill, and he cannot have failed to register, perhaps with an avuncular pride, the emotions that were produced in us by the spectacle that opened up before our eyes. I suspect that it was his desire to let us savour our delighted astonishment undisturbed that caused him to delay those few minutes before, at length, he approached us.

I had read Professor Montet's account of his excavations in Tanis between 1929 and 1932; it was, in fact, that summary of his own researches and the researches of his predecessors, that had caused us to make the journey to Tanis. But we were not in the least aware that he or anyone was working here now. The gentleman who approached us had a cold. He was swathed round with a huge scarf. His eyes were hardly visible behind darkened glasses. He asked us who we were, and though the voice seemed not merely courteous but gentle, we had such vivid memories of the unquiet Dr.

Pappenheim in the Museum at Cairo, that we handed over our papers with great diffidence. They stated quite explicitly we were endeavouring to follow in the steps of Moses, and if the statement had caused such a scene in the general warehouse of Egyptian learning, it was possible that it might cause even more resentment in an actual workshop, so to speak, with the tools and shavings lying about all over the place. We were well aware that, in terms of pure scholarship, our journey begged a question or two, and gave us the advantage of more than one doubt.

“I am enchanted to welcome you here; I am Montet of Strasbourg,” said the man in dark spectacles.

“Professor Montet?” we cried delightedly.

“What luck,” he said, “for all of us! I only got here myself a day or two ago!”

But even without those pleasant words we knew we were dealing with a man as charming and hospitable as he was learned.

“And you have come here, I take it, because you believe Rameses the Second to be the Pharaoh of the Oppression?”

“Exactly!” I said eagerly. “And because we learn from you that Tanis is Pi-Rameses!”

He nodded.

“Well, if Rameses was the Pharaoh of the Oppression, and this is Pi-Rameses—you can’t get away from it . . . Moses was here! *Here!*” I pointed down among the fallen columns, as if they were still upright and Moses was walking among them, in and out of sunlight and shadow.

“That may well have been!” said the Professor guardedly.

“I remember a passage in your book,” Lucas said. “How did it go? ‘The hope of finding at Pi-Rameses any information on the sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt and on the Exodus seems to me chimærical.’ Do you still believe that? You wrote that at least five years ago.”

“Do I believe that still? I do. But all that is on another level of belief and argument.”

"I'm tired of arguing," I said somewhat wistfully. "I want to believe."

"Then let's go and see the excavations while there's still light."

"But you're cold," I objected.

"Please!"

I knew from his tone it would have been hard to prevent him showing us Tanis if he had just had pneumonia or had broken a few bones in an accident.

We moved along to the nearer company of ascending and descending women. I think it was when the Professor first joined us that they burst into song, descending to its rhythm and ascending again. Then, as we came nearer, they began to clap their hands, the singing became louder and louder, they moved faster and faster. We were near enough now to see what was happening. In the hollow under the hill, the men workers were excavating a series of brick-lined chambers. They flung their spadefuls of rubble into the deep reed baskets the girls brought down—they were mostly girls. The girls then climbed to the top of the hill and emptied the stuff. Then they went down again. They had faces like bronze images and narrow almond eyes. They had huge soft silver bangles on their ankles, and wore gilt ear-rings and amber necklaces. And the whole time they moved, they sang, they clapped their hands, descending and ascending faster and faster.

It was a song of welcome they were singing, a song of honour. But it was a curiously impersonal affair, in which we ourselves were a mere occasion or motive. We had emerged out of our dim and trivial world and in a moment would be blotted out again. But these delta girls had sung this same song in the honour of strangers, and clapped their hands in time to it, five thousand years ago and would repeat it five thousand years hence. They had carried baskets on their heads for the building of Sekhet Tchant. They had carted off the rubble after Avaris, the city of the Hyksos, had been thrown down, because of the curse on it. When

Rameses built Pi-Rameses, they brought the black mud for the Israelites to fashion into bricks. They sang and clapped their hands, but the Israelites did not sing. Now, three thousand years later, at San el Hagar, they were uncovering the city from the sands that had entombed it. The day would come when they would cart off the sandy rubble from the ruins of Alexandria and Cairo. They would outlast even the Pyramids, singing this song, and clapping their hands to it, when a stranger came up out of the west.

*Oh night !
Oh night !
Oh you who are here,
You honour us,
You bring us honour,
Because you are here !
Oh night !
Oh night !*

The melody was as simple as the language. It went on and on till work was over and the girls had trooped off into the village and it was quite dark. They receive two piastres a day for their labour. Montet pays them more than Rameses did.

We wandered about the excavations while there was still light to see by, and to us, engaged on our particular inquiry, one of the least spectacular ruins, discovered only this year, was the most exciting. This was an immense house or palace to the north of the Temple of Anta. The Temple had been built of stone, as Egyptian temples always were, so that now it was the most dominant of the ruins of Tanis. It is precisely because the temples were built of stone that they often stand to-day much as they stood long ago, excepting where the material has been treated as a quarry. The houses and palaces, on the other hand, were built not of stone, but of such perishable materials as wood and sun-dried brick, and for that reason practically nothing survives of them.

The brick palace at Tanis that Montet is at present excavating will not be exciting to look at, for the layman, at least. It is thirty-five metres wide, of a length not yet determined, for the ruins lie at a great depth. But its excitement is of another order, for it may well be that it is the House of Rameses which Pharaoh was building for himself in brick, at the same time as he was rebuilding in stone the houses of his gods.

It was at this point that Montet told us of certain finds of human remains he has made in the angles and under the walls of this same building. They include the skeleton of a child contained in a long cigar-shaped jar, with his little dinner-plates hard by. Now, the burial of human sacrifices under the foundations of a building was not in the least an Egyptian custom. It was, on the contrary, an Asian and Semitic custom, well attested both in texts and in archæological remains. We read, for instance, in Joshua: "Cursed be the man before the Lord, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his first-born, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it."

Now, there is a tradition in the Talmud which ties up quite fantastically with the discovery of Montet in Tanis, though it is related not of Rameses himself, but of his son, Meneptah, who is represented as even wickeder than Rameses, and may well have been:

"He placed officers over them from amongst the children of Israel, and over these officers he placed taskmasters from amongst his servants. And he put before them a measure for bricks, according to the number they were to make day by day, and whenever any deficiency was discovered in the measure of their daily bricks, the taskmaster of Pharaoh would go to the women of the children of Israel, and take their infants from them, as many as the number of bricks lacking in the measure, and these children they put into the building instead of the missing bricks. The taskmasters forced each man of the Israelites to put his own child in the building. The father would place his son in the wall, and cover him over

with mortar, all the while weeping, his tears running down upon his child."

No. It was impossible for me to resist these conjunctions any longer. These bricks I was gazing on, there in Tanis in the fading twilight, were those same bricks that the Israelites had made when "the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour, and they made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick." They were the bricks out of which Rameses made his home, and Meneptah added on to it. And it seemed a sweet refinement to one or the other, or to both of them, to practise a trick on these Semitic serfs that they had learned about with great pleasure during their excursions into the countries of the Semites. And they took children of the Israelites and sealed them in cigar-shaped jars and buried them under the angles of the walls, and filled their platters with savoury food so that they should not go hungry on their long journey.

But the children got their own back on Pharaoh, here in Pi-Rameses, even more subtly. There is a great broken colossus in red sandstone lying among the ruins. It was the last thing we saw, or had light to see by.

"You should know," said the Professor, "that this statue of Rameses has a power which, so far as I know, no other image of the King possesses."

"And that is?" I asked curiously.

"Whenever a woman round these parts is sterile, she comes to this statue and squats upon his head, and meditates."

"And is that effective?"

"I understand it does not fail."

"New children for old children—the children he bricked up in his walls."

He smiled.

It seemed to me that poor Rameses, lying prostrate and impotent in the sand there, had at last reached the nadir of his dishonour.

§ 2

Twilight went from between the fallen columns of Tanis. The charity of night blanketed old Rameses and wiped clean as from a slate the sign manual of his son, Meneptah, from the stones where the carvers incised it. There was no more Meneptah than there was when Jehovah obliterated him with a plague of darkness.

We might have stayed, disembodied voices, in the hollow there, till dawn came and gave us bodies again, but for an electric torch that someone on the top of the ridge circled anxiously in the air.

"My wife," M. Montet apologized. "She is becoming unquiet."

"Your cold, Professor!" We blushed with shame that we had let ourselves forget it.

"Please, I beg you! Madame attends us! We will drink tea!"

So we went up and drank tea in the hut on the hill-top. We had for the time being forgotten among the stones of Tanis the wonders that had been wrought in the Field of Zoan. Mme Montet reminded us of them, for in her capacity as housekeeper she was, perhaps, more apt to be reminded of them than her husband with his book and pick. She was of the opinion that a good many of the plagues still haunted these regions, and from time to time they came back and gibbered a little and clanked their chains. It was not possible, she thought, to unloose energies like these and then expect them to lie down and die the moment you wanted them to. She said you had only to try to look out through the window to see how dark it could be in the Field of Zoan. But it was night, after all. It sometimes got quite as black during the day. Once she was talking with her husband just outside there, about some little household matter. One moment she could see him. Then a sandstorm crashed down like a ton of bricks. The next moment she could not see him. Then, as for the plague of the first-born, that was an

uncomfortable thought, too. In 1933, she said, there was a plague in San el Hagar which destroyed nearly all the children. The plague that destroys children is much commoner in these parts than elsewhere. So are frogs. She said you would expect to see a lot of frogs on the fringes of the great marshy Lake of Manzala, but though they had such an interesting pedigree she could do without the locusts and the horse-flies. The boils got in the way, too. Once they had no washing done for a couple of weeks, because everybody round the place had boils. Yes, please, we would like some more tea. It was a little uncanny sitting in the dim light of the paraffin lamp, eating petit beurre biscuits and marmalade, and seeing the savage and stupendous plagues in terms of domestic nuisances. But it must have been rather like that the Egyptian women saw them three thousand years ago, even if they were much acuter then. Professor Montet, swathed in his big scarf, blinking behind his dark spectacles, sat on a deal kitchen chair, lifting a cup of tisane to his lips now and again. He looked in the dimness a little like a Pharaoh on his throne. He has consorted with them a long time now.

Then we remembered Ibrahim. We also remembered Zagazig, our night's lodging-place, and that it was a long way from San el Hagar. We also remembered petrol—that we had almost run out of it. So we said good night to Monsieur and Madame Montet, much moved to find it was possible there should be so much learning and gentleness under one roof.

We were escorted by a man-servant and the electric torch down the tussocky slope. We found Ibrahim immobile but awake behind the steering-wheel.

“*Quais, Ibrahim?*” I asked. “Any petrol?” I was afraid he was going to be very sulky, as he had every right to be.

“*Quais!*” he said. I assumed he had picked up a little petrol. He did not seem unhappy, possibly because there had been no policeman about at San el Hagar. I think he

must have come up against a policeman some time in his infancy, and it has left a deep wound. "Do we go?"

"To Zagazig, Ibrahim!"

The man with the torch went back up the hill. For a moment we were left in pitch darkness while Ibrahim's feet and hands fumbled about for controls. Then, with a click, he switched the head-lamps on. It was exactly as if the lights had suddenly been switched on the blacked-out stage of Drury Lane. A buffalo with emerald eyes and swinging dewlaps came plodding forward. Behind the buffalo came a line of girls with pitchers balanced on their heads. The cortège was drawn up by a man shrouded in his cloak perched high on a camel's hump. The ear waited for the conductor's sharp tap on the reading-stand before him, and the blare of the massed orchestra.

But it heard instead the foot on the electric-starter. The engine turned over. We were bedward bound for Faqûs and Zagazig. The first part of the journey was easy going, for all we had to do was to keep alongside the Canal de Moueys. In a quarter of an hour the full moon rose above the desert horizon. It came up slowly and heavily, like an athlete taking hold of the edge of a platform with both hands and raising himself by inches till he swung his feet through. The single palms, and then the groups of palms, and then the groves of palms, outlined themselves against the purple air. At length, and quite suddenly, the one broad canal that had guided us was broad no longer, and was no longer one. The network of canals was about us again. The roads, the embankments, the fields were empty. The canal folk and the field folk lay like dead men in their tomb-like hovels. Only the armed policemen were awake, and the cloaked and hooded *ghaffirs*, the night-watchmen, doing their rounds.

It was clear that Ibrahim was terrified of the moony watery solitude, and it would have been thought that the wardens of security, the policemen at their bridges, and the *ghaffirs* padding about the clumps of hovels, would have given him some sense of reassurance. It was not so. He had no

SCHOOL IN GOSHEN



alternative but to stop for the policemen, while they asked questions and flashed their torchlights on us, making sure we were not hashish smugglers. But the moment they said "Go!" the car plunged forward like a kicking horse. Of the *ghaffirs* he seemed even more terrified, if that were possible. He was a townsman, and a Cairene, and everything beyond the comfortable limits of his city was formidable to him. He had something of the mentality of the Stone-Age man, who saw only the malevolence of the dead beyond the rampart and ditch of his settlement.

Only one episode occurred during these haunted hours out of which he could extract some solace for being alive. Mid-way along a narrow canal bank we met a belated peasant leading a bullock-cart. Neither of us could turn round. Neither wished to stay for the night. The peasant was finally induced to lead his cart close enough to the edge for the car to pass by. But the track was so narrow it was impossible for him not to lead it too close to the edge. As we accelerated and drove forward, we heard a groaning of timber and a yell of dismay. It seemed possible that anything at all had happened.

"Stop!" we cried.

But Ibrahim did not stop. He did not hear us. His shoulders were shaking, the tears were running down his cheeks, he was yelping like a kicked puppy. He was, in fact, amused. When his hysterics had passed, again we said "Stop!" It was far too dangerous to try to stop the car on our own account. He was to go back to the poor bullock-man, we said. But he said it was quite impossible to go back, which was true. By the time we reached a place where it was possible to turn round, we had no alternative but to believe either that the man was all right by now, or if he was not, we could not be of much use to him.

The journey was becoming quite dangerous. My heart was beginning to knock a little. No-one spoke. It was thought better not to deflect Ibrahim's mind from his driving. Then suddenly once more Ibrahim's shoulders were shaking

and his hands wobbling at the wheel. He was squealing with laughter again.

“What is it?”

“A camel!” he yelped. “A camel!”

“What do you mean?”

“Tee-hee-hee! I once drove a camel down into a canal! Just like that bullock! Tee-hee-hee!”

The spasm died down, the fingers settled firmly again on to the steering-wheel. The canals and the tracks beside them were becoming narrower and narrower. It was soon evident we were quite lost, and there was no reason why we should not be. There were no sign-posts. No one had a compass. It was hopeless to try to steer by the stars, for we could take no direction excepting that imposed on us by the canals themselves.

The canals were not only narrower, but far more dangerous now. Sometimes the tracks were merely lumps of mud between almost empty trenches. Their edges were soft and crumby like broken biscuits. Once or twice we slithered hideously. There would have been little hope for us, if we had gone down into that ooze in our sealed car. I shut my eyes and recited inwardly: “On Linden when the sun was low.”

There were no police pickets in this region, for it was manifestly no place for cars to travel in, least of all at this time of the year. We whispered to each other it would be wiser to try to back out of it somehow, and said so more than once to Ibrahim; but he was convinced that beyond the next bridge, or the next, we would find ourselves on the road to Faqûs, which now assumed in our minds the surface and breadth of an arterial trunk road. But beyond the next bridge, and the next, the banking between the canals in which we drove became narrower, and the mud below on each flank seemed blacker and thicker, than before.

There were now no more police, but here and there, where there were trees and a house or two, there were *ghaffirs* about. Sometimes you thought they were trees or a moon-silvered

buttress of a house, or a shadow on the roadway. Then they moved, and you saw they were men. Some were armed. Some carried huge sticks like knobkerries. At one point a shadow on the roadway moved. It split into three shadows, then became three men. They crept up to us silently, carrying three staves before them. I for my part had it in my heart to welcome them. It seemed almost pleasanter to be knocked on the head and to pass out quietly, than to go on slithering on the edge of an oozy death for endless hours.

“Ask, Ibrahim!” I said. “Ask!”

Jim slowed up the car with the handbrake.

The three shadows came up to us. One lifted himself on to the running-board. The others waited under the darkness of their hoods. There was a moment’s silence. Then Ibrahim delivered himself of a quick patter of questions, like peas shot out of a pea-shooter. But he did not wait for a reply. He released the handbrake, pressed the accelerator, swivelled the steering-wheel left and right, and unloaded the car of the wretched *ghaffir*.

“It is as I thought!” said Ibrahim. “Just beyond the next bridge!”

And, indeed, this time it was as Ibrahim thought. Beyond the next bridge we got out on to a road which was, to a certain extent, a road. That is to say, we were not assured of an unpleasant death by asphyxiation if the car slid six inches to the right or to the left. I embarked on another recitation of “On Linden when the sun was low,” but did not reach the end. I fell asleep and slept like a dead man till we reached Zagazig. I do not even remember climbing the stairs at the hotel and getting into my night-things. I only remember meeting some-one perched up on a high bed with two pillows propping up his shoulders. There was a cascade of curtains enclosing the bed, that foamed whitely down from a hoop suspended in the ceiling.

“Shall I turn the lamp out?” I heard a voice say.

“What? What’s that?”

"Shall I turn the lamp out?" It was Jim's voice. I realized the person with two pillows propping his shoulders was myself.

"No, certainly not!" I said. "Where is the Bible?"

A hand bearing a Bible thrust itself from under the mosquito netting like the hand that came up from the waters to grasp Excalibur. I took the Book. The hand withdrew again.

"For Moses is now grown up," I murmured, turning the pages. "And to-day the call came to him in the palace of Rameses, and he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he saw an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren."

So, strangely enwalled from this day and age within that cascade of netting, I wandered forth with Moses into the Land of Goshen, and read for an hour, then turned the wick down, and closed my eyes, but I still saw the words on the page before me: "And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand."

The sand, the yellow sand of the Field of Zoan, where the delta girls walked up and down, up and down, clapping their hands and singing, singing . . . till they sang no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

WHAT emotion was it that drove Moses out that day from the cool palace into the burning fields? Had he long known that he was not, in fact, an Egyptian prince, the son of Pharaoh's daughter, but only an Israelite, like any wretched brickmaker wincing under the whip of the task-master? Did he overhear the other princes whisper the delicious scandal over the rims of their drinking-cups? Did some-one taunt him with it in a flare of tempers?

Or one day, feeling a trouble within him, did he leave the high wassail in Pharaoh's banquet-chamber, the six kinds of wine, the ten kinds of meat, the harps and the pipes and the lute-playing? Did it seem to him that somehow he did not belong to these things, nor they to him? And he went out among the gardens and the arbours, and walked by the margins of the lily-pools, and passed through a wicket-gate on to the path by the palm-trees along the river. And the wind did not cool his forehead and the water did not appease his trouble. And a voice spoke to him out of the shadow between the rushes and the palm-trees.

“Moses, my brother,” the voice said—it was a woman’s voice. “Go no further. Let me talk to you.”

“Who are you? Are you devil or human?”

“I am human. I am a woman of the Israelites.”

“Of the Israelites? How dare you trespass into Pharaoh’s garden? Begone quickly, or the wardens will find you, and drive a stake through your hands and feet.”

“I placed you in an ark among the bulrushes. I have come back among the bulrushes to claim you for Israel.”

“Who are you, woman, who are you?”

“I am your sister, Miriam.”

“ How shall I know you are Miriam, my sister? How shall I know an Israelite woman bore me? ”

“ Come out into the Field of Zoan, Moses. Come out unto your brethren, and look on the burdens that they bear.”

It does not seem likely that with the quick blood and generous impulses of the character which emerges from the Bible narrative, Moses would have been content for any long period to harbour the suspicion that he was an impostor prince of Egypt. The knowledge came quite suddenly, whether in a divine revelation, or whether a human tongue told it. He went about the fields, and saw the agony of the Israelites, and felt more and more sick with shame as the day went on. All these years he had been Pharaoh’s man. He had fought his wars for him, and when fighting was over, had caroused with him in his banquet-chamber, or jostled with him by plain and river, flinging the boomerang among the wild birds, or hunting the ostrich and the antelope. He had fought Pharaoh’s wars, but there had been none to fight Israel’s. And as he continued on his way, thinking bitter thoughts, “ he saw an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren.”

His eyes blazed with fury. The Israelite blood, so long submerged, asserted itself. He must kill the man. Nothing less would serve. He must kill the man. He started forward impetuously. His impetuosity had always been and was always to be his chief fault. But he heard a footstep or saw a shadow. Was some-one about, then? “ He looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.”

The commentators are perturbed by this act of blood; that it should be with a killing that Moses first stands up in our sight, he who was to bring down from the top of Sinai the commandment against killing. The Talmud declares he was racked with doubt, lest some of the unborn children of the Egyptian might have turned out virtuous men, had they been born. So he consulted the angels, to hear what they had to say, and they assured him that the Egyptian well deserved the

death that was hanging over his head, and there could be no virtue in the issue from such loins.

A Christian writer goes further, and endorses the deed with an almost lyric rapture. "The future hero shows himself courageous and energetic, burning with patriotic ardour, full of a strong sense of justice and of sympathy with the suffering, in their service readily giving up all material advantages."

But in their anxiety both, I think, miss an important point. A great many years of suffering and meditation separate the Moses of that day and deed from the Moses of the Decalogue. He had been till a few hours ago an Egyptian nobleman, with the Egyptian nobleman's indifference to the pain and death of the multitude. It may be he had decreed holocausts of prisoners in his wars. He had certainly seen monuments grow slowly before his eyes, which had exacted the life-blood of thousands of ant-like toilers over several generations and would exact it again before they were completed. The slaying of this one Egyptian cannot, at this moment of his career, have involved for him a moral issue. It must have seemed to him a symbolic act. In the blood of the slain Egyptian he must wipe out the pagan years, he must commemorate the sense that had come upon him of his oneness with his people. He was using a more barbaric idiom than he would have used later, after his purification in the desert of Midian and his transfiguration on the top of Sinai.

"And he went out the second day." From whence did he go out? Whither did he betake himself after he had slain the Egyptian? He was in a state of sore confusion. His heart rocked with the discovery he had made regarding his origin. He was wild with indignation at the agony imposed on his people. He must have ached to seek out his own kinsfolk, and throw himself on their love and charity. But his hands were red with blood. It would go hard with them, if they set the hounds to work, and they traced him there.

No. It would be safer if he went back that night to the palace of Rameses. He must find out where he stood. He

must think things out. He went to his bed under Pharaoh's roof, but slept little, or did not sleep at all.

Next morning he set out again into the Field of Zoan. He had a great deal to learn regarding the condition of his people, having devoted his life till now to a far different learning. "And behold, two men of the Hebrews strove together"—so early in his relations with them did he encounter that tendency towards conflict among themselves or between themselves and God. The sight distressed him greatly. "And he said to him that did the wrong, Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow? And he said, Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? Thinkest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian?" There was envy in those words, and there was hatred. He was to encounter them again. "And Moses feared." It had been no mere fantasy, then, that he had heard a footstep and seen a shadow. But it was not for himself alone he was afraid. How was it going to react upon the people, whose burdens were already hard enough to bear? "And he said, Surely the thing is known."

Yes, the thing was known sure enough.

Whoever had been the hidden witness of his deed, this Israelite who thus addressed Moses, or some other than he, the report was already spread about Pi-Rameses. "Moses the prince is no prince and no Egyptian. He is an Israelite and yesterday an Egyptian was slain by him."

A runner brought the news to the ears of Rameses. All the doubts that had always floated about his mind regarding the creature found in the bulrushes crystallized into black certainty. He was the enemy dreamed of in dreams, announced by portents. He took the gongstick from beside him and beat the gong, till all the corridors of the palace shuddered with the noise of it. "Send out my guard and the captains of my guard! Let the Israelite Moses be taken! Let him be slain with one hundred javelins, and let the carrion of his body be thrown to the jackals on the desert's edge!"

So the guards went, and the captains of the guards. "But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh." He was not to be found anywhere. He had gone to dwell in the land of Midian.

§ 2

A moth had somehow got inside the mosquito-netting. It was stuck against the fabric looking towards the oil-lamp, like a small child stuck against a pastrycook's window. Its tiny body quivered with desire for the flame. I took hold of a wing between finger and thumb and slipped the moth from under the puckered pleats of the netting. I returned to Midian, or rather to the problem of Midian. "As for Midian," I murmured to myself, "I'm sure we're right. If it were only certain exactly where Midian is—"

But I was not finished with the moth yet. I heard a dusty tapping against the glass walls of the lamp. It was to some extent my lamp, and to some extent my moth. I had taken on a responsibility. I had stepped out of the Field of Zoan to become two of the five fingers of its destiny. If I left the lamp burning, the moth would singe its wings. I turned the wick down and followed Moses from the Field of Zoan to the land of Midian.

But that was the trouble. I did not follow Moses from the Field of Zoan to the land of Midian. I remained in Tanis. Or at least my spirit remained there, until such time as Moses should come back again. In my body I had gone out to the edge of the Land of Goshen to seek a night's lodging.

The matter had been debated between us when Lucas and I had worked out the provisional route of our journey, each of us now taking one side, now the other. Was it not our duty to follow after Moses to the land of Midian, even though we must come back with him to this same place again? Must we not try to find out, at this stage of his story, the well where he sat down and helped the daughters of the priest of Midian to water their father's flock? And was it not now, during the Midianite journey, that Moses led his flock to the back of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb, which is the same as Sinai?

But in the light of practical possibilities, we both realized very quickly the debate was purely academic. In the first

place, where and what was Midian? Was it a land, or a tribe, or a group of tribes? Modern Biblical scholarship inclines to the view that it was the most important of a group of tribes in the north-west of Arabia, whom the Israelites considered related to them through their common ancestor, Abraham. Their original home seems to have been on the east side of the Gulf of Akaba, opposite the southern extremity of the Sinai Peninsula, for Ptolemy mentions a place called Modiana, and the Arab writers Madyan. But the book of Exodus infers that the land of Midian was near Mount Sinai itself, though that may have been nothing more than a Midianite settlement, like the Israelite settlement in Egypt.

At all events, one thing was sure. It was not easy to set out for Midian, if it had not been decided just what or where Midian was. As for the well where Moses sat down, that would be still more difficult to locate. There could be nothing but the most tenuous of traditions by which it could be singled out. We were aware that when the time came, the monks in the Monastery of Mount Sinai, the focal point of our journey, had a well of Moses to point out to us within the circuit of their wells. They also have an altar in a chapel, which marks, they say, the very spot where the angel of the Lord appeared unto Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. They have even more than that, we had read. They have the bush itself still green and growing in one of the convent walks; or, at least, it is a bush grown out of a grafting from the original plant.

If all went well with us, we should pay our devotions to them all in the later stages of our journey—the bush and the well, Horeb and Midian. Certainly the passport and transport difficulties of an interposed journey from Tanis to Midian and back again would be quite insuperable. We knew we must wait in Goshen for Moses to reappear again to work the Lord's wonders in the Field of Zoan.

§ 3

Moses had gone to dwell in the land of Midian. The Bible tells us little of what happened to him there between the time of his flight and the very end of his exile, when the Lord spoke to him out of a Burning Bush. But those intervening years were clearly of the most profound importance in his spiritual and intellectual development. In those years the man who had been so long concealed even from himself within the mummy-like wrappings of his Egyptian dignities, threw off his gilded ceremonials and became himself, mystic and poet, prophet and law-framer. He was a grown man when he returned from Midian to Egypt. His greatest revelations had not yet been vouchsafed to him, but he had become fit to receive them.

We are told a charming tale of the way he met Jethro his father-in-law, and Zipporah his bride: how he sat down by a well and the seven daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; and the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. So they returned to their father, who asked why they came so soon. And when he learned that a man had helped them, it hurt his keen sense of desert hospitality that they had not asked him to eat bread, and he bade them forthwith to summon him, which they did. "And Moses was content to dwell with the man," we are told, "and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter."

Now, it seems that almost despite itself the Bible makes the important meeting as between Moses and Jethro, not as between Moses and Zipporah. It is not hinted that Moses felt drawn more especially towards Zipporah than to any of her six sisters. He was content to dwell with Jethro, and Jethro must have been just as content to have him there. The giving to Moses by Jethro of a bride from among his daughters was a natural consequence of the situation. The same

situation, if it arose in a sheikh's household in Arabia at this day, would have the same consequence.

It was not Zipporah who was of importance to Moses in that household. (His other wife, the Cushite woman, was evidently nearer to his heart, and it was his love for her, rather than for the Midianite woman, with which Miriam later was to reproach him.) No, Jethro was the person of importance to Moses in that household. We gather he was a shepherd, and a priest also, a hospitable and learned man, and a man of substance. He was an ancient counterpart to those modern sheikhs of Islam who at this day may be seen in the wadis of Midian, wandering with their flocks by day, and, in the evening, expounding the suras of the Koran to the herdsmen beside their tent; nor will they neglect, if a stranger come their way, to bid him eat bread with them, as Jethro bade Moses long ago.

So Jethro gave Zipporah, his daughter, as a bride to the Hebrew, and we learn nothing more about him till, after the mission is imposed upon Moses by the voice in the Bush, the younger man with fine humility goes back to ask the older man's blessing. Then all is silence regarding Jethro, till, years later, when Moses had long left him, we read that he came with his sons and his wife unto Moses, into the wilderness, where he was encamped, at the mount of God, and there gave him counsel regarding the framing of his laws.

The visit of Jethro to Moses seems to have an importance which it is easy to underestimate. Because Jethro was his wife's father he received him with honour. But surely Moses consulted him in his law-making and embodied his ideas, because Jethro, too, had been his master, a lawgiver himself, or, at least a student of laws. Is it possible that the earliest written narratives contained a lot more than has survived concerning the relations between Moses and Jethro, and that these accounts were gradually extruded by the priestly collators, who felt that it might derogate from the greatness of the greatest prophet, if later generations knew how much the Hebrew owed the Midianite?

It is certain that Moses unlearned and learned a good deal during his exile in Midian, and it is a natural presumption that Jethro helped him in both tasks. He had learned a great deal as a prince of Egypt that was to be useful to him later, but he had to unlearn more. He had been brought up in a luxury and magnificence such as the world had hardly known till then. He had to get the feeling for that out of his bones. He had bent the knee along with the other courtiers in the worship of the beast gods, though his mind and heart must have been troubled early and often. In the desert land, it would be driven in upon him that it was more natural to believe in few gods than many, and in One God rather than few. It was a learning that the kinsmen he brought out of Egypt did not acquire easily. Though they had been slaves, and he had been a prince, or because they had been slaves, they still carried away with them a servile respect for the hawk and the cat and the ibis and the bull, most of all the bull; for when they set to god-making, it was the bull they remembered, and they made a gold image of his son, and worshipped him.

Such were the things Moses had to unlearn. He had to learn things, too, and Jethro helped him learn them. He had known how to dragoon men as their commander. In the shepherding of flocks, he now learned how to shepherd men as their lover. He had to learn patience, and, in truth, he was to need it. He had to learn humility, and he learned it almost to excess. He had to learn self-control, but that one lesson he did not fully learn, and it was to cost him the promised pastures, where another than he was to shepherd the flocks. So, when he came in of an evening after the day's pasturing, the younger and the older man drew together and rehearsed the problems of good and evil, of the gods and of God. There was a good deal to be done during those years of his withdrawal. He was to be made the fit instrument for the Voice that was to blow through him on the top of Sinai.

There was another scholarship, more worldly and local, he

might well acquire from Jethro, the Sinai shepherd. Whether or not Jethro emerged as a youth from the Arabian side of Akaba, he spent a good deal of his manhood in the wadis and plains of Sinai. Moses would doubtless go wandering with him from time to time during the years of his service, thus gathering a knowledge of that tangled landscape, of its water courses and water-holes, which would later be of incalculable use to him. He may, too, have learned of the incidence of certain natural phenomena, unique in those regions, which, if they fell in a measure and at a season unusual to them, may well have seemed to him the goodness of the Lord expressed in miracle for His people's sake.

The Talmud is perturbed about Jethro, in a way in which the original priestly collators may have been, too. It is throughout in two minds about him, and quite misses the point, I think, of the Zipporah episode. It informs us he was once a priest of idols in Midian, and then admits that a sense of the foolishness of idols and the oneness of God came to him. It was because of his conversion that his shepherds deserted him, and his seven inexperienced daughters were compelled to water their father's flocks. Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses helped them, chiefly, it states, for the sake of the downcast eyes of Zipporah, who attracted him greatly. Before anything could come of that, however, Jethro decreed that Moses must first uproot the sapphire rod that grew in his garden, which was the self-same rod that God had bestowed on Adam when he was expelled from Paradise. And Moses did this thing, whereupon Jethro became exceedingly afraid, and cast him into a deep pit. Here Moses remained for seven years, during which time Zipporah kept him alive by providing him with every manner of dainties. At the end of seven years, Jethro came to the pit and cried out "Moses! Moses!" and lo! Moses answered him out of the depths. Whereupon Jethro raised him up and kissed him and acknowledged the greatness of God and gave him Zipporah to be his wife. And by Zipporah he had a son, by name Ger-

shom, of whom we learn nothing more, or very little, either in the Bible or in the Rabbinic books.

Now, in the meantime, while Moses abode in Midian, over in Egypt the burdens of the children of Israel were not lightened. The Talmud reports that a sore leprosy fell upon Pharaoh, which he sought to cure by bathing daily in the blood of a slaughtered Hebrew child. A complaint that the Israelites were neglecting their work took him out in his chariot, which overturned in a narrow pass, so that his flesh was torn asunder and his brittle bones were broken. For three years he lay in agony, and when he died his flesh was so putrid it could not be embalmed.

So the Talmud says, a good many centuries before the mummy of Rameses was to be discovered. But discovered it was, and so far away from Pi-Ramases as the valley of Deir-el-Bahri, in Thebes. It cannot be deduced from its present condition that the embalmers had any difficulty in embalming him, and the carriers did not scruple to carry him all the long way to Thebes. He is housed to-day in the Museum of Cairo.

And Rameses died, and Menepkah reigned in his stead. "And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage," for Menepkah exceeded his father in wickedness. It was the son, and not the father, who put before the children of Israel a measure of bricks, and so many bricks as were missing from the measure, so many children were put into the building . . . a practice of which, as it seemed to us, some evidence survived among the excavations of Professor Montet in Tanis.

But the time was not come yet for the deliverance of Israel. Over in Midian Moses still watched his flocks, like David at a later time. Both were tried as shepherds, the Talmud says, so that when they had proved themselves, they might be given the leadership of men. And Moses watched over his flocks with loving care, finding the greenest pastures for them, leading the older sheep to the tougher grass and the younglings to the new green shoots. Once it happened that a kid ran from the flock, and Moses following, saw it was a stream the

creature had run to. "Poor little one," he said. "I knew not thou wert so thirsty that thou must needs run for water!" And when the kid had drunk, he raised it to his shoulder and carried it back to the flock. Whereon the Lord said: "Thou hast pity upon a flock belonging to a mortal shepherd. As thou livest, thou shalt pasture Israel, my flock!"

So Moses led his flock for forty years, losing not one of his beasts during all that time. But the time had been long. Over in Egypt, the cry went up unceasingly by reason of the bondage. The ending of the time was almost due, the ending of the novitiate in Midian and the agony in Egypt. The moment had come for the Lord to reveal Himself, by way of a fire burning in a bush that was not consumed by it, and a voice calling out of the midst of the bush.

The Burning Bush was the flaming sign of the election of Moses to his high duty, and with it for the first time miracle enters his story. Can the miracle be explained away in terms of natural rather than supernatural phenomena? Even devout commentators find it hard to resist the temptation to rationalize miracle, and they are to become very busy over the later miracles in the Mosaic story. But the Burning Bush does not lend itself easily to such examination. One higher critic declares that it may have been a sudden irradiation by the setting sun of an outcropping spur of rock, a phenomenon I myself observed with some excitement on making the descent from Gebel Musa, though I doubt if I would have seen it in those terms in any other locality, or if I had never read the passage in question. Others look for help a little mournfully in the prevalence of dendrite fossils in the Sinai region—that is to say, of fossils impressed with the pattern of some primordial vegetation. Stanley, I believe, was the first to report the celebrated sunbeam which at sunrise, one day in the year towards the end of March, darts into the Chapel of the Burning Bush through a fissure in the rocks on the summit of the Gebel-ed-Deir (the mountain that directly overlooks the Convent across the gorge it is built in). In the small apse of the Chapel itself the monks point out a narrow obliquely-



WEDDING GUESTS

pierced window through which the sunray projects itself on to the Chapel altar. I have not read of any traveller who has witnessed the phenomenon for himself, and the inference of the story is not quite clear. Is it to be understood that this was the way that the Burning Bush was first ignited? Or were the rocks on the top of the mountain later miraculously adjusted to permit of the annual commemoration of the original miracle?

The fact appears to be that in regions traditionally associated with miracles which have possessed the imagination of men for thousands of years, the wanderer's mind is attuned to a sensitiveness, a power of perceiving phenomena in terms of those august images, which would elsewhere be outside its scope. I am at this point compelled to quote the apparition of a Burning Bush which was so exact a rendering of the strange and lovely marvel described in the Bible, that I quite literally was afraid to trust my eyes. The apparition lasted several seconds, and though I was aware of its exact rationale while it endured, I still said to myself it was mirage or inward fantasy. The thing happened "in the back of the wilderness," in one of the wadis under the flank of Sinai. It was the evening of a hot and windy day. As we approached the arena where two or three wadis debouched, the winds met and, joining forces, became a cyclone, a tall pillar of air violently rotating on its axis, its whole length defined by the sand it sucked up from the dry wadi bed. In the centre of this arena was a large thorny acacia, the only tree which grows in these regions. The sun had for some minutes been hidden behind a long bank of cloud. It remained hidden until the cyclone reached the acacia. Then in the moment the cyclone possessed itself of the tree, the sun hurled its rays obliquely upon their embrace. The whole tree went up in flame. The smoke of it soared in golden gusts. Every thorn was a spit of fire.

It continued so for several seconds. It seemed as if the cyclone were impaled on the sharp spikes of the branches. It turned and thrust and turned again. The bush burned with

fire, and was not consumed. Then at last the cyclone freed itself, and went hurtling along one of the wadis. The tree was no more than a thorny acacia again, arid and lonely in the centre of the hills.

And Moses turned aside to see the thing, and the Lord called out Moses, Moses, to him, and declared Himself and His name, and announced His purposes. And first Moses hid his face, and then asked, in his immense humility, who was he that he should go unto Pharaoh, to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? And by what Name should he speak of God when he went to the children of Israel? The Lord, the God of their fathers, was to be the Name, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And the king of Egypt would not let the people go, and Egypt would be smitten with all His wonders which the Lord would do in the midst thereof. And still Moses was afraid, so that the Lord to assure him showed him signs, and changed the rod he held into a serpent, and covered his hand with a leprosy and straightway cleansed it again. And Moses himself would have the art to show these signs when he stood on the threshold of Pharaoh's palace, but if Pharaoh still did not hearken unto his voice, he was to take water out of the river and pour it on the dry land, and it would be blood.

And once more, despite all these assurances that the Lord had given him, his inexpugnable humility seized him. "Oh Lord, I am not eloquent, being slow of speech and of a slow tongue." And when at last he accepted the mission, it was doubtfully and without strength of heart. "Oh Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send."

"And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses." Was it the suspicion of the faint heart or of the double meaning that angered Him? But nothing by way of punishment is visited at that moment and in that place on the racked prophet, though he is to pay grievously later. Instead it is arranged that Aaron his brother shall speak for him, for he can speak well. "And thou shalt take in thine hand this rod," said the Lord, "wherewith thou shalt do the signs."

So Moses went back to Jethro, his father-in-law, to ask his blessing, and took his wife and his son, and set them on an ass and set out for Egypt. But his heart was heavy within him, the Talmud tells us, and he dallied with leaden feet on the way. The Bible says that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him, by which it is usually understood he fell into some sort of sickness. But the Talmud will not have it so. The angel Af, in the shape of a serpent, appeared and swallowed his whole body down to his feet, and gave him up only after Zipporah, his wife, nimble as a bird, circumcised her son Gershom with a flint (exactly as it is done at this day among certain primitive tribes) and touched the feet of Moses with the blood of the circumcision. So that Moses was released by the angels, and he continued on his way, so far as the Mountain of God, and there met Aaron, his brother, who had been bidden by the Lord to come up out of Egypt and meet him there. And together they passed by the frontier posts, and once again, after an absence of forty years, Moses was in Egypt, walking between the broad river and the black fields. And they gathered the elders of the children of Israel together, and Aaron spoke as had been commanded him, and did the signs in the sight of the people, who, learning that the Lord had visited them and seen their affliction, bowed their heads and worshipped.

And at last now the moment for the supreme confrontation had come, Pharaoh and Prophet, Egypt and Israel. And Moses went further on his way, across the Field of Zoan to the palace in its midst, which Rameses had built up out of its ruin, and his son, Meneptah, now dwelt there. And there, still wakeful under the mosquito netting of my room in Zagazig, I remembered vividly the aspect of the palace, as it had emerged from my father's account of it, long years ago one Sabbath eve in the tiny kitchen in Doomington. Or I should not say 'vividly' so much as that I saw it across great beams of slanting light, blocked with huge panels of shade.

It was so vast a palace, my father said, that it had four hundred gates, one hundred at each side, and at each gate a

guard of sixty thousand men. But there were lions also, as well as guards, two lions to each gate, and none dared approach till the captain of the lions spoke to them and bade them lie down. And when the two emissaries from the Lord came closer, Balaam and the other advisers of Pharaoh requested that the lions should be loosed upon them. And this was done, but Moses did no more than lift his sapphire rod, Adam's rod, his shepherd's rod, the staff that had become a serpent and a staff again; and the lions came gambolling towards them like small puppies.

The brick-lined chambers (I mused idly) of the Palace of Rameses that we had seen a few hours ago were the foundations of a great building, as was proved, Professor Montet had said, by the unusual thickness of their walls. It was likely that there were many gates to the palace. But perhaps not so many as four hundred, one hundred to each side.

So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and demanded in the Lord's name that he should let the people of Israel go, that they might make a sacrifice unto Him in the wilderness. And Pharaoh called all his scribes to him and bade them look through all the chronicles of the gods to see whether mention was made of the Lord of Israel. But none was there. And Pharaoh laughed in his beard and said: "I know not the Lord, how shall ye make proof of him?" And Moses handed the rod to Aaron and Aaron cast it down upon the ground and it became a serpent. And the tears rolled down the cheeks of Pharaoh and his courtiers and his magicians. And he exclaimed: "Can your God do no more than this? Didst thou learn no mightier magic, Moses, in the schools of On? For merchants will carry merchandise to a market where it is lacking, but who would carry brine to Spain or fish to Accho?" And he bade his magicians do as Aaron had done, and they did so forthwith, and then he summoned the children out of the schools and they cast their small rods upon the ground and they became small serpents, and Pharaoh and the courtiers and the magicians wiped the tears from their eyes with the hanging hems of their sleeves.

And indeed the wise men of Egypt were most expert in magic. In the world of the living they controlled the gods, their apparitions and responses, through contraptions of the most formidable ingenuity. But they controlled with their magic the world of the dead, too. They provided the dead with a series of magic formulæ written down on rolls of papyrus and laid with them in the tomb, by which means the dead became masters of the world they were journeying to. And on the heart of the dead man, under the wrappings, a stone scarab was placed, inscribed with a charm, beginning: "Oh my heart, rise not up against me as a witness." And the thing was of such potency that when the dead man stood in the Hall of Judgment before the throne of Osiris, the ticking of that stone beetle was louder than the ticking of the guilty heart, and even Osiris could not hear the heart's testimony to its guilt.

It was not to be wondered at that the magicians of Egypt were scornful of the rod of Moses and Aaron, when their mere scarabs had such gigantic art, and they could turn out as many in a day as clients appeared with money enough to pay for them.

But Moses and Aaron waited till the laughter had died down. Nor were they in any way affrighted by the serpents that slid hissing among the painted walks of the pavement, the painted reeds and lotus flowers.

And when release had fallen upon Pharaoh's hall again, Moses spoke a word in Aaron's ear, and Aaron touched the head of the serpent that had been the Lord's rod, and the serpent devoured all the serpents of the magicians in all that place. And for many moments the silence persisted, and the faces of the magicians were grey as ash, and Pharaoh's chin sank into the hollow of his left hand and with his right hand he tapped his sceptre restlessly on the floor. Then at last Balaam, the chief magician, and his sons, Jannes and Jambres, went over to Pharaoh's throne and whispered certain words in his ear. And Pharaoh lifted his chin from his hand and said: "Wise men are ye, Moses and Aaron. But who does not know that beast will devour beast, the more hungry the less hungry?"

But render your serpent into a rod of wood again, and restore our rods to us, and if the rod of Israel devour the rods of Egypt, it shall be deemed a deed of high magic, and most memorable." And Aaron did even so, and touched the Lord's rod with his forefinger and it went about among the rods of Egypt and devoured them all. And the magicians screamed like old women that this was but trickery, and Pharaoh rose up in his place and shook his sceptre furiously, and bade Moses and Aaron begone forthwith out of his sight.

And after they were gone, Pharaoh in his wrath made the burdens of the people more grievous than they had been, demanding that they should make bricks each day to the same number as before, yet must themselves find the straw to bind them together, whereas before it had been provided for them. And when the tale of the day's bricks was less than it had been, the officers of the gangs of brickmakers chosen from among the Israelites were beaten by the taskmasters of Pharaoh, and the officers went to Moses and complained sorely. And Moses was ashamed and knew not where to turn his head, for it seemed the signs he had wrought in the Lord's name had brought worse affliction upon the people, and he went to the Lord and spoke out of the bitterness of his heart.

But the Lord said unto Moses: " Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh: for by a strong hand shall he let them go, and by a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land."

So it was that the signs of which the Psalmist told later, were wrought in Egypt, first among the gathering of the elders of Israel, who believed, and later in the palace of Pharaoh, who did not believe. And because the signs did not prevail upon Pharaoh, the Lord ordained wonders in the Field of Zoan, to the number of ten, and at the end of them Moses gathered the children of Israel together, and led them out of Egypt on the long journey towards the Promised Land.

It has been conjectured that this exodus of Israel took place about the fifth year of Menephtah's reign, during the confusion caused by the invasion of the delta country west of

Tanis by an army made up of the wild Libyans and their allies.

It is not difficult to imagine that the Israelites would interpret this swarming of the barbarian hordes as a sign and a wonder. A prophet of their own people had astonishingly come up out of the East like the rising sun when things were darkest for them. He had announced that he had heard the voice of the God of their fathers. The day of redemption was at hand when He would redeem them with a stretched-out arm and with great judgments. Their fervid imaginations would already set to work converting the desert swarms on the westward horizon into local imagery. There was such slaughter that the rivers ran red with blood. The impact of the gongs on the stretched skin of their drums was like the booming of frogs. They brought lice with them out of the torrid wastes. They filled the sky like swarms of flies and devoured the fields like locusts. They beat down the vines and the saplings like hail, and with their number all the heavens were dark. Did they bring up some cult out of their mysterious land, which demanded the slaying of the first-born in the cities that fell to their onslaught?

So already the imaginations of the Israelites were at work, while they gathered together at night in their mud hovels, and there was much debate: "Let us go." "Let us not go now but later." "Let us stay. What else will there be for us if we go but the stony plains of Sinai?" "Let us go. Have you not heard of the promise that Moses has brought to us of a land flowing with milk and honey?" And it was during this period of hesitation, that there was an onslaught on the land of Egypt of one plague, and a second, and a third and a fourth, of exactly the same nature as those plagues which beset Egypt at this present day. But rarely do they befall the land with such virulence, and never so many plagues at one time, as those plagues that befell in Menepthah's reign, in his fifth year, during the invasion of the Libyans.

So Moses gave his rod to Aaron, who stretched it over the

waters, and they became blood. That was three thousand years ago. But even at this day, Sayce tells us, each year the water becomes like blood at the inundation about the end of June, for the red marl from the mountains of Abyssinia stains it a dark colour which glistens like blood in the setting sun. And for that reason the natives call the river the Red Nile, till it abates in October. In addition to the red marl, it is said, the Nile becomes torpid with vast numbers of infusoria, which make the water a reddish yellow.

And all the water in all the ponds and ditches became blood, says the Talmud, even the water that was kept in jars of wood or stone, and the spittle of the Egyptians became blood when they spat it from their mouths, and blood dripped from the foreheads of their gods. And this endured for seven days, but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, for the magicians of Egypt did in like manner with their enchantments.

So a plague of frogs was spread upon the land, such as at this day is sometimes caused by the annual inundation, and the whole air is full of their croaking. The plague will be at its thickest on the borders of such marshy lakes as Manzala, over against Tanis.

At first only a single frog appeared (the same sweet tale-tellers will have us know), and he croaked and croaked and summoned all the other frogs in all the waters and the land was covered with them. They could mysteriously pierce hard metal surfaces, and the walls of marble palaces split at their croaking, and they passed through. So many were the frogs, and so many more, that an old frontier dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia was settled by them. Where there were frogs, so far was Egypt. Beyond was Ethiopia.

But even though his magicians did in like manner, Pharaoh requested Moses to lift the plague from his land. And this was done, but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

So a plague of lice, *kinnim*, was spread abroad, or, more likely, gnats, or mosquitoes, as we should call them. We have ancient authority for the translation of the word either way,

but the mosquito is much more characteristic of Egypt, and likelier to attain the dimensions of a plague. A modern observer records that when the Nile is still overflowing, in the autumn especially, and the rice-fields stand in water, the mosquitoes rise from it in such swarms that the air is sometimes darkened with them. And the magicians attempted with their enchantments to bring forth *kinnim*, but they could not. And that, it is explained, was because their power was limited to the production of things larger than a barley-grain, and *kinnim* are manifestly smaller, whether they are lice, or mosquitoes, or whatever they might be.

And again Pharaoh relented, and again hardened his heart, and the land was visited by a plague of flies, such as frequently visits the land to this day, borne on the south wind. Here again there is a doubt that the proper nature of the plague has been rendered in the English translation of the word “*arob*,” which means rather a swarm, a mixed multitude.

The Talmudic commentator, as frequently, yields to his instinct for the grandiose. Without actual outrage to the word, he translates it as a “mixed horde,” and lets loose on Egypt a plague of bears, lions, wolves, panthers, and so many birds of prey that in their flight they obscure the heavens. The writer is quite implacable. At the cessation of the plague the animals that the Egyptians had killed in self-defence returned to life, so that the Egyptians might make no use of their hides. And Pharaoh gave leave to the people that they should go and sacrifice to the Lord, though they must not go “very far away,” he stipulated. And the plague was lifted; but once more he hardened his heart.

On this a grievous murrain was visited on the herds and flocks, the horses, the asses, and the camels (though it is not likely that many camels were there). And this plague, too, failing to achieve Israel’s deliverance, a boil broke forth on man and beast, a painful eruption which may not have been unlike the “Nile scab,” which is at this day frequent in Egypt about the time the river begins to rise in June, and afflicts the sufferer for several weeks. The boil seems to have been

especially distressing to the magicians, who "could not stand before Moses because of the boils." Their magic seems to have enabled them to produce these various cutaneous phenomena, from leprosy to boils, but not to have gone so far as enabling them to cure them.

And now the epic of calamity begins, like a river fed with many turbulent tributaries, to rush roaring to its pitiless finale. A hail was sent down, such as had not been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. There was a fire among the hailstones, which was not extinguished, as the wick is not extinguished in the oil it swims in. And the hail came down like an axe on the palm-trees and cut them down, and when they were cut down, the fire in the hailstones consumed them. And the hail was followed by a cloud of locusts, which devoured what the hailstones had not cut down and the fire in the hailstones consumed. Of all the plagues this, and the one that follows, are those that can be seen most exactly at this day as the chronicler of long ago wrote them down. And at this day, despite all the attention that modern desert-rulers have given to the problem, the chief hope of deliverance from the locust plague lies in a wind arising, such as arose in Egypt then, and driving the things into the sea. And when once more Pharaoh's heart was hardened, once more a wind arose, but this time the hot wind from the south, the *khamsin*, the wind which is so hot it can be felt and so charged with sand that the darkness is darker than night. And once more, as eight times before, Pharaoh's heart relented, the plague was undone, the heart of Pharaoh was hardened again.

But this ninth is the last time. No more the dreadful procrastination will be endured. The most desolate retribution is assigned to his obduracy, and not Pharaoh only will be smitten, but all his people, and even the cattle in stall or field.

And the shroud of mosquito-netting in which I lie enswathed comes away from the hoop where it is suspended. The four walls of my hotel room fall flat like four playing-cards. I am a small child sitting at my father's table on the first

night of Passover. There are disks of unleavened bread on the table, and bitter herbs, and roast flesh, and before each of us a wine-glass. And when my turn comes round, I rise to my feet, and pose the four questions, of which the substance is: "What mean ye by this service?" And we all join in the reply, in plain recital and descant and madrigal. And the substance of the reply is: "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses." And drowsy though I am there in Doomington, and here in Zagazig, I rise from the table there and my bed here, and my spirit goes out into the Field of Zoan and into the Land of Goshen, wherever the children of Israel live in their mud villages among the canals. And all the air is full of the bleating of lambs, which the masters of households bring forth out of their pens, for the sacrifice which has been appointed. And over all Goshen the first-born go about with small lamps from doorpost to doorpost, so many it would seem as if the constellations were loosed from their moorings and were moving about among the trunks of the palms. And the masters of households take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood of the lamb which has been poured into a basin, and strike the lintel and the two side-posts with it. And all go indoors again, to roast the flesh of the lamb and to eat it. Thereafter they wait all night long, not knowing at what moment the summons will come. And fear is upon them, despite the Passover, for a mighty visitor is due that night in Egypt, and no man can but be afraid of him. And then a cry is heard from far off: but surely that can be the wind only, or the cry of a beast, for no man ever cried out so dreadfully. And then a cry is heard from near at hand, and then another, and another. It is all Egypt crying out in its utter woe, for there is not a house anywhere where there is not one dead. So sad a cry has not been heard in all the annals of men. Then the cry dies down as the wind dies down, till at length it is quieter than the battlefield after the battle. In the houses of the Israelites the hours go by so slowly they do not seem to move

at all. Dawn comes suddenly as with the beating together of cymbals. The sound of feet is heard running in from the edge of the village. A messenger is here. He has run so swiftly he can hardly catch his breath. "I am come from Moses!" he cries. "Gird ye your loins! Get your shoes on your feet! Get your staves in your hands! Moses and Aaron and the dwellers about Raamses are assembled together and at this moment set forth on the first stage of the journey. From all over Goshen ye are bid to meet on the high road between Raamses and Succoth. We pitch our tents there!"

And he turns again and runs towards the next village, his cloak lifting behind him in the springtime wind.

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

I DID not get up till after eleven o'clock next morning, or that same day, to be exact, with the sun thrust square through the gap in the curtains like a sheet of bright glass. I flung open the windows, and music came into the room from every quarter of Zagazig, gramophones and fiddles and an incongruous brass band practising in some back room somewhere. There were a lot of people singing, too. It was all as it should be. Either the Israelites or the Egyptians were making that noise, and for the same reason. Pharaoh had let the children of Israel go. Perhaps both the Egyptians and the Israelites were celebrating simultaneously. The Egyptians had had a bad time. A great many people had felt that Meneptah might have let the Israelites go six or seven plagues earlier. (In an odd sort of way people had disliked the boils more than anything.) And now that Meneptah had screwed himself up to the point, he had issued orders that everything possible should be done to get them started; they were to be refused nothing they asked for. It was hard to have to give up one's best cattle, not to mention the jewels of silver and the jewels of gold and the raiment one had stuffed away at the bottom of one's chest against a rainless day. But another plague would have been one too much. It was cheap to get rid of them at the price.

So we had breakfast in the vestibule downstairs, between two lions frozen, but with a playful expression, like the lions at the gates of Meneptah's palace after Moses pointed his rod at them. We had Turkish coffee brewed with goat's milk, and eggs fried in goat's butter and good rolls. And the records went round and round and the desultory cornets in the back room slumped flat and squealed sharp by turns. Then we wandered about in the town for an hour or two. Our mode

of progression was swifter than the Israelites', and we had little fear we should not catch up with them before nightfall. We saw a lonely fish on a solitary slab in the market and told ourselves it was the Zagzig fish, which swarms in the local canals and gives the town its name. It does not swarm in the market. We saw two gentlemen in bowler-hats and long black alpaca coats over their *djellabiyehs*, and we told ourselves that they were the local cotton kings (for Zagazig is the cotton emporium of the Nile delta). They had secret and important relationships with Manchester, we told ourselves. We wandered through the street of smiths, where we saw them converting paraffin-tins into cups and basins and lamps. Then we wandered into the fruit-market. On this edge of Goshen the land was so fertile that when we handed over a piastre or two for fruit to eat on the day's journey, our arms were so loaded we could hardly walk and the car had to be summoned to hold the residue. It was a little like the embarrassment of riches with which the earlier Egyptians loaded the Israelites, to induce them to move off as quickly as they knew how. The note of plenty was struck again in a café where we asked for a glass of beer before starting. It was accompanied by a repast which seemed to be the Goshen equivalent of the minute tray of salted almonds which sometimes attends an apéritif in Europe. Beer came, a large bottle each. Beside each bottle three plates were set. One contained lumps of bread, cheese sandwiches and ham sandwiches. Another contained black olives, boiled potatoes flavoured with oil and the halves of boiled eggs well salted and peppered. The third contained several little bird-corpse, their heads looking very peaked and pathetic stuck on the ends of their long thin necks, and their claws pathetically hunched up beside them, clawing at nothing. We were told the bird was the *bak-a-fik*, and that it sang. There was so little flesh on its body that we would have been quite happy if they had let it go on singing. We later learned that the name is corrupted from *bec-d-figue*, so called because the bird punctures the fig with its long beak, for which reason sportsmen in the

South of France shoot it in great numbers. So far as they went, Lucas and I found the brief morsels very succulent. Jim looked at them with glazing eyes, his face became pale green, then he went out to take the air. That was discouraging. He was the party's official strong man.

We found him in the car some minutes later. Ibrahim thrust his tarbush towards his left eye and sounded his horn. We left the Egyptians behind us in Zagazig, scraping their fiddles excitedly, and turning the handles of their gramophones for all they were worth.

Once more we addressed ourselves to our journey in the steps of Moses. We had left him the day before, as it were, in Rameses, which is Zoan, which is Tanis. "And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses (Raamses) to Succoth." We would fall in with the host, therefore, somewhere on the road to Succoth (if the scholars had correctly located Succoth for us). It was clear that part of the day's journey, at least, must take us through the land of Goshen, the region where the greater part of the Israelites were settled during the bondage, and which they were now leaving behind them.

At what point had we entered it, at what point would we leave it? The limits of Goshen seem never to have been exactly defined, even when the Israelites lived there, though they can be indicated with some accuracy. Goshen was evidently somewhere in the eastern reaches of the Delta, facing over towards the eastern frontier. For, in the first place, it is hardly likely that the original Israelite settlers would have been allowed to settle any nearer the heart of Egypt, however popular Joseph their sponsor was at the court of the Hyksos Kings. In the second place, it very much suited the Hyksos to establish a buffer settlement in the eastern delta between Egypt proper and the Asian wastes whence they had themselves emerged. And finally, the whole tenor of the Exodus narrative proves that at no point can Goshen have been many days' march from the eastern frontier.

The Bible itself seems to be a little contradictory on the subject. Now it pictures the Egyptians and Israelites living side by side, presumably not only inside but outside Goshen (hence the necessity for the passover on the lintels), now it pictures the Israelites as being definitely confined to Goshen (hence their immunity from the plagues). But it is not at all impossible to reconcile the two pictures. It is reasonable to imagine that a considerable number of Egyptians began to move into Goshen after the Israelites had enriched the country, and it is equally possible that over so large a stretch of time a number of Israelites began to infiltrate into the outer regions beyond the limits of Goshen. As we have speculated earlier, it is not impossible that Moses himself was born of a family that lived outside the Pale.

But he was living *inside* the Pale when he was a prince at Pharaoh's court in Zoan? For it will be remembered that he was able to walk out of the palace and look on his brethren working in the field. In that case, the fringes of Goshen would have extended a long way to the north, which is not impossible. Perhaps it is reasonable to suggest that Rameses had imported a regiment of Israelite labourers from Goshen proper, to build him his "slave-city" of Raamses, and it occurred neither to him, nor to his son, Meneptah, to export them again.

However, the scholars have got down more closely to the matter of the exact location of Goshen. They report that mention is made of a place called Kesem among the hieroglyphic lists of the "nomes" or administrative centres of ancient Egypt. (More recent scholars assert breathlessly that Kesem should really read Shesem, but perhaps this journey should not sidetrack into thorny philological mazes.)

It is also stated that the religious capital of Kesem was called Pi-Sapt. Now, there is a village at this day called Saft-el-Henna, a name which seems quite definitely to embody the ancient Pi-Sapt. The village was only a few miles east and slightly south of us at Zagazig. Finally, in 1885, as if to clinch the matter as effectively as these matters can be clinched,



BELLES OF THE CIRCUS

Naville discovered during the course of local excavations that the ancient name of Saft-el-Henna was Kes. The circle was complete. The Goshen of the Israelites was, therefore, a region of which the present Saft-el-Henna is the centre, roughly, the Wadi Tumilat, a green wedge of territory with its base on Zagazig, which thrusts out eastward for some fifty miles with the desert creeping more and more closely in on it.

“To Saft-el-Henna, Ibrahim!” I said. “To Saft where the henna grows, the spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon. . . .”

Ibrahim doubted whether he could guarantee all of these.

It was impossible to make that day’s journey without seeing everything we came across in terms of the tremendous drama we had been rehearsing in our minds. A kilometre or two along the road we saw a brick-field, where thousands of bricks made out of Nile mud were piled up to dry in the sun. It was a large brickfield and there was only one rather disconsolate *fellaḥ* at work in it. It contained many more bricks than he had been able to manufacture on his own and many more than he would be able to pile up unaided. It was clear to all of us that it was an Israelitic brick-yard which had been abandoned by the Israelites in the middle of a shift during the recent excitements. We assured ourselves that the bricks were well made, being knit together by the straw which had once been provided for the Israelites and they had had latterly to pick up for themselves. Then we moved on.

A little distance further we came to a granary where mounds of wheat lay heaped high and brown and even like sand-dunes. It had been wind-winnowed out in the villages and was now being hand-sieved and passed into sacks.

“Corn in Egypt!” said Jim, remembering an illustration out of his Sunday-School primer.

“Yes!” I agreed, a little disappointed. “It looks more like a scene out of the tale of Joseph than out of the tale of Moses!”

“No!” Lucas disagreed. “It looks like the tale of Moses

right enough. They took practically no corn with them at all, just enough for a few unleavened cakes, but that didn't last long. That's why the murmuring started so soon. No, it wasn't corn they stuffed in their sacks, you remember."

"You're talking about all that jewellery they carted off," I said, a little hotly. "That's the way every folk-tale ends. The villain is despoiled and the hero gets the princess, or the crown, or the sword, or the sack of jewellery. And what if they did carry off a few baubles? If some-one had worked you to the bone for four hundred and fifty years and bricked up your children in the walls of their houses——"

"I was not criticizing them!" Lucas interposed. "All I want to say is that that wouldn't be my idea of loading up stores for a desert journey."

We continued. The country was fertile, watered by a sweet-water canal and shaded by fine trees. The Israelites had made a good job of it. We bade Ibrahim move slowly, so green the fields were and the water so fresh. We knew that the fields we were making for were neither fresh nor watery.

Two or three kilometres further on we came at last to the metropolis of Goshen, the village of Saft-el-Henna, which is now a sprawl of mud houses on a low hill, with a mosque and a school at its centre, and an electric water-pump at the foot of it. It was a grander place in the old time when Rameses built a great temple here to the sun-god's glory, though by now the distinction cannot have been very clear in his mind between the sun-god and himself. But, then as now, the women of the place gathered the flowers of the henna-pod and dried them and placed them in a sack at night between their breasts, and powdered the leaves and made a dye for their hair, and for the nails of their hands and feet, and for the hollows of the palms.

The mosque which has taken the place of the temple of Rameses was not distinguished, but the school was, or, at least, the schoolmaster. He was a very tall schoolmaster, and when we came to pay him our respects, he was engaged in conducting a sports hour in his playground. He wore a

rather nordic overcoat and rather baggy trousers, but he had great dignity. His fifty small boys were scrabbling on all-fours on the pressed earth; then they turned round and shook a leg in the air; then they went back again on all-fours. He lined them up for us so that we might take a photograph of them all, backed by the mud wall of the playground and the village palm-trees. He seemed taller than any palm-tree.

We left him to his eurhythms and turned to the older city. The two protagonists of our story, Rameses and Moses, were very much in evidence. (Rameses in local legend always unites the two parts played by himself and his son, on the occasions when he is anything more specific than Pharaoh.) We were shown one or two formless stones by the electric pump, and were assured these were the foundations of a great synagogue established by Moses. He had established it in this place because he had hit another stone and made water flow from it, as was proved by its name, *Ain Musa*, the Well of Moses. (I think it would be safe to say that we saw no more fresh water on our journey which was not called *Ain Musa*, and which Moses had not caused to flow by striking a rock.) This was the water which the electric pump was at present distributing through the irrigation channels of the bright green fields. Balancing ourselves on the banks of the channels, amid the cooing of pigeons and quacking of geese, we walked to the place of Rameses. This was a mound of rubble with a great many ancient potsherds among the rusted buckets and the sardine-tins. There was the fragment of a Pharaonic column leaning against the trunk of a palm-tree. There was a Pharaonic sandstone head almost rubbed away into complete blankness by the gentle implacable scouring of the black soil. But Rameses was here, and Moses was here, alive on the lips of the ditchers and the water-carriers, three thousand years after their time. It gave another and a precious validity to this day in Goshen.

We continued on our journey, and after a time came up with two or three herdsmen driving their herds before them, and then three or four more. They seemed in something of a

hurry. The beasts were in a sad state. One herd of twelve tiny calves had all their heads bound together with one rope. They were panting pitifully. Their fawn tongues, speckled with froth, dangled down beside their jaws. Soon from all the paths across the fields villagers came driving beasts before them or carrying merchandise in baskets on their heads, eggs and fruit and vegetables. It was not possible now to move at more than a snail's pace. All Goshen was moving to market. Then we saw the market itself, fenced and stockaded, and with a great multitude of men and beasts heaving in it like a tide between embankments. It was nothing more, of course, than the weekly market for the countryside, or it may have been a special market, for it was very extensive, the largest we saw in Egypt. But after the way in which everything we saw and heard all day long had converted itself into some aspect of that old story, we would have been very obtuse not to feel that this meeting for market was not a simulacrum of the gathering together of the Israelites from all the limits of Goshen. Here were Moses and Aaron and the families from the Zoan region, or perhaps they had not yet arrived, and that was what the host were waiting for. Here were the families from the region of the wicked town of Bubastis, where the lewd women mock and shake rattles and the men blow on pipes and all drink wine and are abominable. Here are the families from Kes, a mile or two further west, the town which has given all Goshen its name. And we, too, go in among the people, and mingle with them, for we are dedicated to the long journey which is appointed to them, over scorching desert and in the valleys of great hills.

§ 2

It is said of the number that made this journey that they were "about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children. And a mixed multitude went up also with them." In short, a host of about two million people. In terms of the practical possibilities of the case, the figure is so much more than merely impossible, that when it was first

written down, it was obviously not an arithmetical computation but a poem. That gives an air of slightly comic solemnity to the mathematical analysis of the number, which various scholars have worked out. If six hundred thousand men (says one) were divided into twelve armies of fifty thousand men each, and formed in close order of one hundred men in a rank, each column would have covered half a mile of road. If half a mile were left between each of the twelve columns, the total length of the host would have extended along thirty miles of straight road. (But excepting for the desert, the road was never straight and would very rarely allow a hundred to march abreast.) So that the host, in the most favourable circumstances, would have taken three or four days to pass a given spot! But it is hardly necessary to pile up the impossibilities, except for the addition of this one, that such a host could not have been supported even in the settled conditions of Goshen, let alone in the waterless desolation of Sinai. Another distinguished scholar attempts to get out of the difficulty by a suggestion (which has not been kindly received) that the word translated as "thousand" should properly read "tent" or "family," and thus reduce the figure to a mere twenty-seven thousand.

That, it would seem, is as far from the essence of the matter. The number is a poem. The eastern mind has always found in numbers the purest essence of poetry, and to the compiler of the earliest elements in Exodus, the number "six hundred thousand" was quick with lambent flashes and musical with undertones to which our modern eyes and ears are insensitive. It is unlikely that the number six hundred thousand would have been any clearer a concept to him than sixty thousand, or perhaps, even, six thousand, and the same might be said of the dwellers in those same regions at this day, such, at least, who have come into only superficial contact with modern civilization. The desert is no breeder of an exact sense either of size or number. A man, a tree, a hill, may be minute or vast according to the condition of the atmosphere. The trees in an oasis may be so many, because they are actual

trees in an actual oasis, or they may be none at all, because they are mirage trees in a mirage oasis. Size and number are not real attributes but subjective fantasies.

To return to the number of the host: it is true that the priestly narrator of Exodus (who was responsible for its latest and most precise elements) seems to give it an appearance of literalness by his highly elaborate census of the tribes in the wilderness. But the same impulses are again at work. And, in fact, this attitude towards numbers is especially characteristic of Jewish mysticism throughout the whole history of the race. The Talmudic writer some two thousand years later who tells us that the palace of Pharaoh had four hundred gates and at each gate a guard of sixty thousand men, is playing exactly the same transcendental game of numbers and poetry, or more properly, performing the same transcendental ritual, as those old chroniclers.

§ 3

We had caught up with the host. It was a gay and exciting thought. The market itself did all it could to help along the fancy, and we did not find an insuperable difficulty even the fact that it was primarily devoted to buying and selling. Despite Pharaoh's orders that the Israelites were to be given everything they asked for, there was quite probably a certain amount of last-minute buying and selling in that earlier assembly. The "flocks and herds, even very much cattle" were there, animals for transport and for food and for sacrifice, calves and kids and lambs, sheep and goats, donkeys and bullocks. There were also chickens in coops and black-and-white rabbits in hutches. (I could not make up my mind about the rabbits, though Moses had not yet issued his various dietetic taboos.) A man carried off a squealing goat by the ear, another dragged a sheep away sideways by one fore-leg. A bullock tied down by ropes on a low brightly-painted wain seemed marked for early sacrifice, and to have some sort of melancholy consciousness of his election.

From great heaps of unglazed pottery under a baobab, everybody seemed to be helping themselves to water-jugs, plates, vases, basins. It did not seem likely they would survive the journey long. Everything seemed to have been dumped here that the dweller in Goshen might need—though some of it did not seem likely to be very useful to the wanderer in Sinai—everything from small phials of cheap scent to gaudy camel-bags, from Japanese glass bangles to wooden ploughs. Flat disks of unleavened bread lay about like piled plates, for the wanderers to stuff into their wallets. An enterprising Egyptian was going about with oranges to quench their thirst. He had a great necklace of oranges on a string of greenery round his neck and a nest of six oranges in his turban.

But it was the women, above all, who most easily lent themselves to the illusion, wherever they were, squatting beside their wares, or striding up and down, their babes strapped to their backs, making their purchases. They were so laden down with jewellery, tinsel though it all was—necklace strings of rolled gold coins, attendant strings cascading from nose and ears, circlets of glass and silver alloy round ankles and fore-arms—that it was easy to believe the Israelite women had looked very much like that after they had helped themselves to the contents of the Egyptian women's jewel-chests. There was no time to put things away neatly, and nothing to put them in. The only thing to do was to make oneself one's own jewel-box, forehead and bosom, arms and ankles. At the end of the lane, the elders were gathered together, a youth gravely passing a hookah from one puffing mouth to the next. Perhaps they were still waiting for some contingent to come in. After a time, a messenger brought a word and whispered into the ear of one old man. The word went round, like the hookah, from one old man to the next. The youth in charge of the hookah extinguished the coals. The elders rose to their feet.

"They feel they ought to be moving," I murmured. "It's still a long way to Succoth. But they have the body of Joseph with them, and despite all the perils of the way, they will come to no harm in the end."

For I recalled how my father had told us that without the body of Joseph they would neither have been able to set forth, nor to continue on their journey from stage to stage. And while certain of the Israelites prayed to the Lord (he said) and others trembled and others stuffed their wallets with gold pieces, it was Moses himself who went about among the burial-places of the Great Ones of Egypt, the pyramids and the sphinxes and the obelisks, for only he remembered how it was written: "and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt." And he would have been hard put to it to say under which of these tombs Joseph lay buried, but that he was drawn to one of them by a certain sweet odour, and that was the odour of the bones of Joseph. But Joseph lay buried deep and far beyond the outer portal of the tomb, and the tomb was made like to a fortress, and Moses knew not how to bring forth the body of Joseph. And then the Lord reminded him of the oath that Joseph had taken of the children of Israel, saying: "God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from thence." And Moses said these words again, and behold there was a sound as of thunder and the walls of the tomb split and the body of Joseph came out of the darkness. But there were two gold dogs on either side of him, that the magicians had placed there to be his guardians, and these barked loudly, and would have advised the Egyptians, so Moses touched them with the point of his rod, and they were silent; and Moses took up the body of Joseph and went to join his people.

So in the wake of Moses and the host and the body of Joseph that went with them, we moved eastward to Tel el Kebir, the apex of the thin wedge of the Wadi Tumilat, and so moved out of the Land of Goshen. Here we paused to pay our respect to the dead left behind by a far later host, for here lie buried four hundred and fifty British soldiers of General Wolseley's campaign in 1882, a long way from the billiard-room on Edge-ware Road or the bicycle-shop at the corner of the village green, where, I think, their ghosts would prefer to haunt. The

canal we had followed from Zagazig now joined a broader water by which the delta network is connected with the Suez Canal at Ismailieh. Beyond this point the greenness of Goshen petered out, reduced to a thin fringe on either side of the canal. We were approaching a zone of military importance and the road, which lies along the north side of the canal, improved, as the life and light went out of the landscape.

It was at Succoth that night the host would pitch its tents. Now, I had a very clear picture in my mind of Succoth, though I did not expect the village of Tel el Maskhuta, which is taken to be the place meant, and whither we were now proceeding, to resemble it greatly. For there is still a festival among Jews called the "Feast of Succoth," and when I was a small boy the Succoth played a very important part in the annual pageant of my year. It was ordained that we should feed during a whole week in a Succah (or tent, or booth, or tabernacle, as it may variously be translated). Now, it was not easy to pitch a tent on the stone slabs of the minute backyard of our minute house in Doomington, so, instead, we made a fourth wall of cheap planking, and slung a framework of thin laths between the wall of our house and the low wall which separated us from the house next door. We covered the laths over with straw from packing-cases, to pretend that we were making it water-tight. Then at the intersection of the laths we suspended oranges and apples, which hung only a foot or two above our heads. Then we draped the walls with coloured cloths and brought in a table and chairs and we, too, were encamped in Succoth, like our ancestors three thousand years ago. On great occasions, when we entertained guests, we even brought in the yellow table-cloth from the parlour. My mother was proud of that table-cloth.

It was to Succoth like those my mind went wandering, a little wistfully, as we sped between canal and desert to Tel el Maskhuta. There was time to rehearse the reasons why scholars have identified these places with each other and both with Pithom. During excavations at the place they were

shortly to call Tel el Maskhuta, the Egyptian place-name Thkw, or Thukkw, was found so frequently, that it was evident that was the name of the place in ancient times. Now, w, being a plural ending in Egyptian, was converted by the Hebrew scribe into oth, the parallel ending in his own language, thus attaining Thukkoth, or Succoth. Further inscriptions indicated the place was also called Pi-Tum, the House of Tum, the Setting Sun. That is clearly identical with the name of that "store-city" of Pithom, which, as we learned earlier, the Israelites built for Rameses at the same time as they built Raamses itself, the town which was called after his name. The name lingers in these regions so late as the time of Herodotus, who tells us of a city called Patumos. Under another name the place endures for several more centuries, then the sand entombs it. And then, at the end of the eighteenth century, a French archaeological mission unearths again the God Tum, the Setting Sun, from out of the sand-stifled ruins of his home. He, and his other self, Ra, the Rising Sun, are seated on either side of their colleague in godship, Rameses the Second. It is this discovery, a monument in red granite, which gives the place its name, Tel el Maskhuta, the Hill of the Image. The Image has been moved to the public gardens of Ismailieh, where it rests on the emerald lawn, between clumps of canna and bougainvillea and golden lily. But the Setting Sun does not set and the Rising Sun does not rise and the hands of Pharaoh are frozen on his knees.

The village of Tel el Maskhuta lies on the south side of the Ismailieh canal. The road to the east to-day leads along the north side. We had therefore to over-pass our destination by a kilometre or two, as far as the village of Abu Sueir, where there is a ferry. We halted at this place for a little time to follow in the wake of an Arab wedding, our feet quickening to the thud of drums and the loud squeal of desert fifes.

High-perched on an exceedingly supercilious camel with a

grand purple-and-pink head-dress, the bride went ahead, domed in a scarlet-and-orange-brocaded palanquin. Behind her stalked three almost as supercilious camels, with bright rugs sweeping down on each side of their humps, and six small straw chairs perched up aloft, three per side, with the hermetically veiled female relatives tottering precariously in them. Now and again the procession stopped, while two revellers did a formal dance with two long wooden staves, advancing, retreating, advancing again, clashing the staves in mid-air. Another reveller did a clown act, but that, too, seemed of a hieratic nature, for though his gestures were stupendously comic, no one laughed. I tried to take a direct photograph of the bride's palanquin, for in that crowded and swiftly changing spectacle it was difficult for so tentative a photographer as I to use the angle view-finder, by which the camera seems so meanly to be taking a photograph of some other object than the one the lens is pointed at. It seemed, and it was, a perfect object for angle photography, for the bride's brother, seeing my camera pointed at his sister's palanquin, showed his teeth and took out a knife. Ibrahim, who was in the vicinity, promptly withdrew to the car and wound up the windows. A youth named Ali took the situation in hand. He informed me, in English, that the bride's brother, whose name was Mustapha, was bad. He would go further, he was not good, very not good. As for himself the opposite was the case. He was good to the point of being very good. He used to work in a camp of English soldiers, and twenty letters, in English, announced how very good he was. Though he was but nineteen, he had a wife and two children, whom he, of course, supported. He also supported his father, who had been rich and was now poor. How, I asked him, did he make his living, and the living of his dependants. He had worked in a garage, he said, after working in the English camp. But he did not work in a garage now. He took visitors over to see Tel el Maskhuta. And when, I asked him, did visitors last come this way. Three years ago, he said.

It seemed there was no time to be lost. "Take us to Tel el Maskhuta!" I said.

We had to wait half an hour or more while donkeys were rounded up for us. There were no more than two available, one black, one white, which, in his chagrin, because there was no third donkey, Jim called Rameses and Menepkah. Now at last the expedition embarked on the ferry, Rameses and Menepkah, Lucas, Jim, and myself, Ali and two donkey-boys. Arrived on the further side, we struck away obliquely from the canal-bank and moved through soft sand-dunes into the setting sun. In twenty minutes or so, we came in sight of the decrepit hovels of Tel el Maskhuta away on the left, but ourselves continued on the ridge of the dunes till, some minutes later, we reached the series of heaving mounds and weltering troughs which was Succoth, which was Pithom, which was the place where the Israelites pitched their tents at the end of the first stage of their journey between Egypt and the Promised Land. There was little similarity to the outer eye between these Succoth in the sand-dunes and those Succoth of my boyhood, when we pitched our pitiful backyard travesties of tents. But there was a sense in which they were the same thing.

There is little to be made out by the inexpert observer in Tel el Maskhuta. A dim sand-blanketed hulk lunges and shoves forward and round again. This is the rampart of the city, of which in certain places the mud-bricks still stand ranked together, pretty much as when the Israelites piled them up under the foreman's lash. The dunes are pitted by a series of brick-lined cellars, which have caused a great deal of excitement among scholars, and a certain amount of ill feeling. The point at issue is, in fact, whether these constructions were no more than cellars or were independent constructions which stood up four-square out of the ground. It is a point not easy to decide from their present appearance and condition, but it is certain that nothing in the way of doors or windows can be made out in them now. "There are the store-places of Pithom!" jubilantly, cried M. Naville, who discovered them.

“It is these store-places which made Pithom a store-city. There are granaries exactly like these on the Egyptian monuments, filled and emptied from above, to keep the grain airtight!” As the silos are at this day, which raise their doorless and windowless heights above the plains of Minnesota. But these things are nothing of the sort, declare certain modern critics (who do not seem in every case to have visited the actual site). “They are probably nothing more than the foundation walls of a fortress. These late Egyptian fortresses were built up on massive brick platforms containing hollow compartments.” But it seems to the present writer, who lifts his voice in such learned company with extreme trepidation, that the constructions in question are distributed so unsymmetrically about the place, that it is highly unlikely they were all “brick platforms with hollow compartments.” And even if some of them were, what was to prevent those, too, from being used as “store-chambers,” much as the crypts are in a modern arsenal?

No, it was not hard to believe that some of these forlorn cellars we looked down into were the store-chambers where Rameses the Second stored his grain or his arms, and actually Rameses the Second, no earlier Pharaoh. The name of no Pharaoh earlier than Rameses the Second was found among the inscriptions, so that it is to be concluded that Pithom must have been built expressly for him, a heartening corroboration, as it seemed to us, of the general argument of our journey.

“Here,” said Ali reverently, “here is Pharaon!” He took us down a shallow trough to the ruin of a head, with prominent ears and blind eye-sockets. “Here is Pharaon!” Ra had deserted him, Tum was not beside him, Rameses looked very helpless and lonely, with those large ears and blind eyes. Then Ali went a few yards further and kicked the sand from another lump of stone. Then he scraped it with his hands, and so at least revealed a cartouche, the sign manual of Rameses. “See!” said Ali. “Like with ring. Like officer in British camp.” He licked the seal of an imaginary ring, and stamped it down on some imaginary sealing-wax.

A little distance further, again he looked round for a stone and found it and scraped the sand from it. It was a granite foot, curiously perfect, come away clean at the ankle.

“An Israelite foot!” muttered Lucas.

“Why?”

“The foot is pointing westward, straight towards Goshen, the melons, and the cucumbers and the leeks. He’s the first of the murmurers. He wants to go back.”

We moved on. As we moved, we dislodged some antique rubble that slid down into one of the store-chambers. A fox that had its earth there, took fright, and slid up its run over the rampart. The back of his yellowish-brown tail stood up for a moment, burning brightly against the sunset. In another pit, a white rabbit crouched, dead or alive we could not say.

“To catch fox,” said Ali. “Fox very not good. Like Mustapha,” he remembered. “No, not go there,” he insisted. We were within a yard or two of another pit, more intact than most of the others. “Wild cat jump out! Miaou!” he went, and spat, and scratched at the air with his nails. A heron flew silver against the crimson and deep blue of the east. In the west, the sun poured like liquid out of a crucible of cloud. As the birds dipped and soared between sky and dunes, the sun caught their wings as sometimes a window-pane is caught in the far ends of a city, or a swinging thread of gossamer in a brake, close against the eye.

“Abu Sueir?” asked Ali apprehensively. We had been silent so long, he was afraid we were aggrieved he had had so little to show us.

“Abu Sueir!” we sighed. We moved on again. A jackal slunk by along a trench of gloom, and paused and turned round not many yards away, looking steadily at us in dour surmisal. Ali showed his teeth and laughed in the jackal’s face. The beast turned, and his head drooped lower than before, and in a second or two he was gone.

“Over there!” said Ali. “There canal!”

Between the rumpled coffee-brown velvet of the flattened

dunes, the canal stretched less like water than like a flat blade of silver set in a haft of pale green mother of pearl. We rode along the bank for fifteen minutes or so to the ferry, and so came back to Abu Sueir again. Then we paid them off, Ali and the two donkey-boys and Rameses and Meneptah.

"I hope it will be less than three years," I said to Ali, "before visitors come again to Pharaon!"

"Yes," Ali agreed sombrely. "I hope. There is father. There is wife. There are two children, one boy, one girl." He counted them off on his fingers.

"And yourself," I added.

"Yes. And me." The prospect seemed bleak. Then he recalled something which seemed to hearten him a little.

"But Mustapha. He not know nothing. He not work in English camp. He very not good." There seemed to be something brewing between Ali and Mustapha. The little I knew about Mustapha had prejudiced me, too, against that young man.

"Mustapha quite not good," I agreed.

Some-one was plucking at my coat. I turned. It was, of course, Ibrahim.

"Yes, Ibrahim? What is it?"

The white of Ibrahim's eyes stood out sick and large. His forehead was damp with sweat.

"*Quais?*" he asked.

"*Quais!*" I assured him.

He drew a deep breath. "*Quais!*" he sighed. He had been quite convinced that they had done away with us between them, Ali and the donkey-boys, and Rameses and Meneptah.

"To Ismailieh, Ibrahim!" I said.

So we left the host behind us, encamped at Succoth, under the green boughs which roof the booths there. But the boughs are perished now, and there is no shelter under them, and only the jackal encamps there, and the wild cat lurks in the store-places.

§ 4

We reached the city of Ismailieh rather less than half an hour later, a city which rose up in the desert during and after the construction of the Canal, as beautifully furnished with trees and waters as any mirage, though this mirage did not go. It was not without a sense of guilt that we splashed in a hot bath in the Palace Hotel, remembering the Israelites, who had made so long a stage that day, and had fallen asleep where they lay down, over there in Succoth, too tired even to take their sandals off.

We came down to the lounge en route for dinner, and saw a sight we could not believe, and said to ourselves: the gardens and fountains of Ismailieh are real, but these apparitions are not. These are mirage. They are refracted from Bath; or perhaps not from Bath, from Aldershot. For while they are a mirage of British officers, they are not retired in Bath, they are on active duty in Aldershot, as can be seen in their bearing and their age. The whole place was full of these mirage officers wearing tail-coats and white waistcoats, and their mirage ladies in evening dress. Some of the males wore sashes and medals. It seemed it was a masonic dinner they had assembled for, over in Aldershot. They ordered whiskies and splashes. We heard them quite clearly, all that way.

So, marvelling greatly, we went in to dinner, and drank a Greek wine called Hymettus, like a pale dry Sauternes. We did not scruple to ask for a second helping of roast chicken, for it was good and we were hungry. There was a crème caramel, better than is usually served in Aldershot, or its outposts. Then coffee followed. Then we sallied out into the moisture-softened air, and walked the length of several shaded avenues, and heard the fountains plashing on the lawns. Then we asked where the centre of the town might be, thinking to divert ourselves a little, and walked the length of several more shaded avenues, and came at last to the centre of the town.



It was not lively. The shops were shut and the cafés were open, but they were not much gayer than the shops. Some of the cafés had a card in the window: "In Bounds for Troops." Others had not. The largest of the cafés had a large Greek man in it, who smoked a large cigar and strummed "Tipperary" on a piano to attract the soldiers. But there were no soldiers, excepting for one big-booted youth on the pavement, wearing a civilian suit and a trilby hat. He was obviously a soldier, and an English one. He was looking neither this way nor that. He was not having a good time.

"Hello, chum!" I said to him cheerfully.

"'Ello!" he said without feeling.

"Is there any life in this town?" I asked.

"It's Thursday!"

I gathered that Thursday was a bad night for life. "And the other nights?"

"Not mooch."

My blood quickened. I had suspected it. Now I was certain. He was a kinsman. He, too, came from the North Country. I waited for him to speak again. But the poor youth had passed into aphasia.

"Not much?" I prompted him.

"Nay. Only what we maäks when we gets droonk!"

Oh, he was not only North Country. He was Lancashire.

"What regiment are you, chum?" I asked him.

"Manchesters!" he replied.

"The *Manchesters*?" I cried exultantly. "The *Manchesters*?" It was infinitely exciting, here on the portentous marge of the Red Sea, to come across a youth from Manchester, where long years ago I had first gone questing in the steps of Moses. "I, too, come from Manchester!" I cried.

"Manchester!" he said with scorn. "I doan't coom from Manchester! I coom from Worsley!"

"And they took their journey from Succoth, and encamped at Etham, in the edge of the wilderness."

We took our seats in the car, next morning in Ismailieh.

“Where?” asked Ibrahim.

“Well, where?” I asked.

“Let’s think it over,” said Lucas.

In working out our journey, we had already become aware that of all the forty stations of the Mosaic journey, there was not one concerning which it could be said that it was on such a line of latitude and longitude as it can be said, for instance, of Birmingham. There were not more than three—Succoth, Ezion Gebir and Nebo—of which, disregarding entirely the argument of tradition, the location could be given with something nearer the probable than the plausible. Of the rest the majority could only be located, rather doubtfully as a rule, by a species of etymological cross-word puzzle. Several have remained impervious to every sort of phonetic blandishment.

Where *was* Etham? It was one thing to know in advance that Etham was one of the many stations concerning which all is guesswork; and another to get into the car at Ismailieh with Ibrahim awaiting instructions as to where he was to drive us. So much can be gathered from the text: the place was evidently eastward from Succoth, for it was a stage on an eastward migration. It would have been reasonable to expect that the line of march would be east by north, for the destination was Canaan. But it could not have been so, for two reasons. Moses would have to be careful not to bring his people up against the chain of fortresses which, as we learn from various sources, extended in this region along the frontier north to south. The second reason is this: it is said of Etham it is “in the edge of the wilderness.” Now, Succoth, as we have seen, lay quite close to water. (The water is to-day called the Ismailieh Canal, but except for certain periods of neglect, there has always been water here, back to the days before history, when the water was actually an arm of the Nile.) The host must have continued their line of march along the canal-bank, both because it was the sensible thing to do, and because it is recorded that they

only get to the edge of the wilderness at Etham. If they had moved away from the canal at any point, they would have landed themselves in the wilderness without any more ado.

Mention has just been made of a line of fortresses. The Egyptians spoke of it as *Khatem*. But *Khatem* has a familiar sound, surely? *Khatem*—Etham—that was the way the Hebrews wrote it down. The host had come up to one particular fortress on the line of fortresses to which they gave the name of the whole system. It was the fortress on the eastern extremity of the canal, but that was also the most southern fortress, for the simple reason that in those days, southward from this point, where now Lake Timsah lies, extended the waters of the sea.

The Israelites called the place Etham. At a later day a town grew up on the same site, not to cover a frontier of fortresses, but to administer a frontier of water. The name of the water frontier is the Suez Canal. The name of the town is Ismailieh.

How could we tell Ibrahim to drive us to Etham, when here we were in Etham already, in Ismailieh, among the acacias and the roses and the fountains, on the edge of the wilderness?

The host had taken things a little more easily in this second stage of the journey, between Succoth and Etham. Or perhaps they had been held up till late that day, waiting for the arrival of the latest detachments from the last outposts of Goshen.

We drove northward along the canal to a small hillock whence we could gaze down on Etham-Ismailieh. From north to south the superb trench of the canal affronted the desert. Below the town Lake Timsah steamed like a marsh, with three sails of fishing-boats coming up through the blue exhalation like three fleeces of white bog-cotton.

Against the parapet beside us slanted a bicycle. No cyclist was to be seen anywhere. It was so old a bicycle, so forlorn and decrepit, it seemed as if no-one had ridden it for three thousand years, since the host turned southward from

Etham, and the owner felt he had no further use for it. Out of the west the sound of a newer engine came. The sound increased till the whole sky throbbed with it. The thing flashed like a sea-gull with the sun on it.

Jim looked up, screwing his eyes, and listened. "A Hawker machine! Rolls Royce engine!" he decided. He is learned in these things. "Scouting round!"

"Scouting round?" Lucas repeated dreamily. His mind was adrift among the earlier patterns and images. "Meneptah's on the alert again! Look out for Pharaoh's chariots!"

As he spoke, my eye endeavoured to trace the line of march between Succoth and Etham. It was here, we are told, that the Lord first went before Israel in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

"Look!" I cried suddenly. "Along the road there, by the canal? Do you see? A pillar of cloud! And when night comes——"

"No," said Jim firmly, "it isn't a pillar of cloud!" He is somewhat literal-minded. "It's a car kicking up the dust! Looks like an army lorry!"

"Perhaps you're right," I admitted heavily.

That pillar of car-dust was not much by way of an interpretation of the physical nature of the pillar of cloud, and it was hardly intended to be (though it bears some affinity with a learned colonel's recent suggestion that the pillar of cloud was nothing more nor less than the dust of the host's own traffic as it moved). "The symbolism had no doubt some natural basis," it is urged of this as of other miracles, a contention which several times on this journey seemed to me a rather fierce effort to make the best of the two worlds of faith and reason. It is said, for instance, that the idea of a pillar of fire was suggested by a custom well-attested in desert countries of carrying at night-time a brazier of burning wood at the head of a caravan of pilgrims or marching troops, so that stragglers might not get lost. The smoke of the brazier against the flawless sky would serve the same purpose by day. Some-

times the burning brazier did no more than indicate the chief's tent, or would be carried before him ceremoniously on the march. Doughty describes how on the Muslim *haj* "cressets of iron cages are set on poles, and are borne to light the way upon serving-men's shoulders in all the companies."

There is poetry in this attempt at an explanation of the miracle, but a rather minor poetry. The pillar of fire is constricted somewhat unhappily within the dimensions of a brazier; or of the huge cauldron of burning naphtha which has more recently been suggested. The attempt to link up the phenomenon with a volcano, which has been done more than once, does not suffer from that defect. It was done again for our especial benefit by a British soldier with whom we travelled for a short time over the uplands. (We found ourselves remarking frequently, though we did not wonder at it, on the especial fascination that the technique of the Mosaic journey and the rationale of its miracles exerts upon the military mind.)

We had still once again, by a new conjunction of tides and winds, worked out the Red Sea Crossing. Then our attention turned towards the pillar of fire and cloud.

"Tell me," the soldier said, "what phenomenon is there in nature which is a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day?" He answered his own question. "A volcano."

Lucas and I looked at each other swiftly. We had already heard of that volcano. We had been reading about it only two or three days ago in two brilliant papers written by the Rev. W. J. Phythian-Adams, and published a few years ago in a learned quarterly. Earlier exegetists had brought it up less convincingly more than once, in connection with more than one miracle. It was an obvious explanation of the Burning Bush, of the Lord's voice on Sinai, of the plague of darkness which was distributed over the Land of Egypt. Submarine volcanic action was very helpful with the Red Sea Crossing. But we had not heard of it in connection with the pillar of fire and cloud, of which the essence was that it was volatile. The Rev. Phythian-Adams's volcano was, at all events, stationary.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Of course. A volcano." It occurred to me at that moment that the soldier might have got his idea from the learned quarterly, though he did not look like the sort of person who has leisure enough for that sort of publication.

"So you agree with Phythian-Adams?" I asked casually.

"Who?"

I repeated the name.

"No," he said, a little tartly. "I didn't read about that volcano. I flew over it."

Lucas and I looked at each other again. Here was an interesting corroboration of the scholar's contention, provided by a man of action rather than a scholar, one who had a first-hand knowledge of the country he was talking about, that went back for years. It was the sort of corroboration to which we attached a special value. It was essential, I felt, that we should not be swept off our feet by this grim alliance of scholar and soldier.

Yet after all (I reassured myself) let them do their worst . . . Why should they not? Was it not a different Mount Sinai we were dealing with?

"Please tell us about your volcano," I insisted.

"Well, I ought to say this first," he explained. "I'm not one of those who believe that the Israelites went wandering about in that frightful peninsula for forty years. Water, supplies—it couldn't be done." He spoke very authoritatively.

"Depends on how many," I said meekly. "It's been done before. It's still being done to-day."

"Well, not two million, anyhow."

"No, not two million."

"I believe it all happened in Northern Arabia. I'm not the only one, either."

"No," I agreed.

"Quite a few good Christian scholars believe it. There's also a great mass of Muslim tradition behind it."

"Certainly, Midian was in Arabia."

"There you are. Midian. Where Moses went to be a

shepherd. That wasn't the only thing he learned there, I should think."

"By no means." (There was that naphtha, for instance. There was manna.)

"And that's the place he went back to, when he led the Israelites out of Egypt."

"Which way?" I murmured.

"That doesn't affect the issue."

I thought it did. I did not argue.

"We're talking about the pillar of fire and cloud. The volcano, in other words. Is there a volcano in northern Hedjaz, an extinct volcano, I mean? There is, there's two, in fact. There's one north of Maan; there's a much bigger one, in the extreme south-eastern corner of Transjordan. They call it Harat Tabuk. That's the one I think it is."

That is the exact conclusion of the Rev. Phythian-Adams. Lucas and I looked at each other again. We felt exactly like two plotters in a play, with the absent cleric the arch-plottor.

"'Harat' actually means 'lava area'; you know that?" the soldier went on.

We did not contradict.

"Now, there's lava in Sinai, but it belongs to geology, not to history. There's been no volcano active there for a million years or more. Tabuk, on the other hand, has been active as late as the sixth or seventh century A.D. It certainly was active in the time of Moses."

"You're not suggesting, are you," I asked, "that the volcano moved up and down the country with the Israelites?"

"Not at all. The Israelites moved up and down round the volcano. Until they finally trekked off to the Jordan. They never moved far from the volcano, because that's where their water was. Any amount. There's enough water in that region to have kept the whole two million going."

"You mean your volcano was Sinai, too?"

"Of course. The Bible actually says that Sinai is in Midian."

"It's not so precise as that, is it?" I ventured.

"The whole thing from beginning to end," he hurried on, "reads like a volcano. It sticks out a mile. Burning Bush, Pillar of Fire, everything. Let me tell you how I think it happened.

"Moses would go off and see Jethro now and again and discuss these laws he was framing. The Israelites would go off now and again on a cattle-raiding expedition, like any other Beduin tribe, and Moses said: 'Don't you people worry about me. You can't get lost. You'll always find your way back by the volcano. It'll be a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. I'll turn up sooner or later.' Do you see?"

I reflected for some moments. Then, "You'll have to reconcile that with the Talmud account," I said.

"And that is?"

"It was not exactly a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day. It was rather a pillar that shed sunlight by day and moonlight by night. You see, the Israelites were surrounded by a mist, so that they could move from place to place without being visible to their enemies. It was only the pillar shedding sunlight and moonlight that told them the difference between night and day."

"I see."

"In this pillar the two letters were visible, Yod and He, which together make up the Supreme Name. All the week the two letters flew about directing the host. But on the eve of the Sabbath, and all the Sabbath day, they remained exactly where they were, poised over the Ark. And then, when the host started moving again, the four standards of Israel shook in the air, the trumpets sounded and the winds blew, spreading abroad the odours of spices."

"That was how it was?" said the soldier on the edge of Arabia.

"That was how it was."

§ 5

The host, then, was at Etham now, headed direct for Canaan. But it was a long time before they were to arrive

there. "And the Lord spake unto Moses saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn back."

They were to turn back. What was the reason for this momentous *volte-face*? The Bible itself gives two explanations. According to the first, it was realized that if the host proceeded straight for Canaan, they would not avoid war with the Philistines, and after three centuries of bondage, it was not to be expected they would do well in it. According to the second, they were turned back expressly that Pharaoh might be tempted to pursue them, and the Lord would get Him honour by the destruction of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea. The Talmud decides that Moses gave the signal for return so that the departure should not seem like flight. An ingenious soldier (another ingenious soldier!) has written a book to prove that the host turned southward and marched along the western side of the Red Sea gulf, in order that it might there embark in a waiting flotilla for a point on the coast of the peninsula opposite. But, in attempting to supply an answer to the question, we wondered whether the politico-military elements of the situation had been sufficiently taken into account. If there is any truth in the idea that Moses took advantage of the confusion caused by the Libyan invasion to lead his people out of Egypt, he might well have expected to find the eastern frontier inadequately guarded. Now, Siccoth-Pithom was a fortress, and he had had no difficulty in pitching his tents there. He doubtless expected to have as little difficulty with the line of fortresses that ran from north to south. But on approaching Etham, his scouts brought him news that the garrisons still remaining there would be almost as dangerous to his untried host as the Philistines themselves. He thought it wiser, therefore, to beat a temporary retreat and turned southward again to await developments.

The place of the next encampment, we are told, was "before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-Zephon." Nothing whatever is known about these places, excepting that it was there, at a spot indicated by those names, that

he Crossing occurred, usually spoken of as the Crossing of the Red Sea. Whatever the central core of that apocalyptic experience was, it seems quite impossible now that the place where it occurred will ever be decided.

The difference between the landscape as it was in the time of Moses and as it was in the middle of the last century—that is to say, before Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, revolutionized its whole aspect—is incalculable. In regions like these, the landscape is modified not merely from century to century, but from season to season. Paradoxically enough, the construction of the Suez Canal made the Isthmus look more like, not more unlike, the country where the first tremendous act of the Exodus was played out, and the maintenance of the Canal assures a considerable degree of stability to the landscape.

A consultation of the map, for those who have but a little knowledge of the workings of nature in such regions, makes the study of the elaborate verifications of the geologists and historians almost superfluous. The Gulf of Suez is a narrow arm of water. Northward from the gulf-head extend areas of lake and marsh, interrupted by flats of humped sand, all the way to Port Said. First comes the Little Bitter Lake; then, connected with it by a narrow channel, the Great Bitter Lake; then a smaller complex of waters called Lake Timsah; then, at a much further interval, the great Port Said marsh area of Lake Manzala. From the whole disposition of things it will be evident that at one time the head of the gulf was a good deal further north than the present head at Suez, anywhere so far north as the region at present occupied by the waters of Lake Timsah.

Somewhere, then, south of the site once marked by the fortress of Etham, now perhaps marked by the city of Ismailieh, the Crossing of the Sea was accomplished. Somewhere south, for it is narrated the Lord turned back some part of a day's march, at least, before they pitched their tents at Pi-hahiroth. How far south? At all events, not so far south as the present head of the Gulf, though that is

indicated traditionally as the place of the Crossing. The tradition loses value, for the place pointed out would move southward, as the head of the gulf moved southward. It would not have been so far southward that the waters would be so deep they would present "mountains" rather than "walls" when they were divided. There is a more important consideration. It is stated in the English text that "God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea." Here they encamped beside Pi-hahiroth, and here the Crossing was accomplished. But the "Sea" of the Hebrew text is not the "Red Sea," though the translators rendered it so. It is the "Sea of Reeds," *Yam Suph*. Now, reeds do not grow in salt water, excepting where there is a considerable admixture of fresh water. The "Sea" which the host crossed would have to contain so much fresh water that there would be enough reeds growing in it to give it its name. It would also have to be in direct tidal connection with the sea, so that wind and tide could withdraw the waters and wind and tide restore them again. Lake Timsah would have fulfilled these conditions. It connected the fresh Nile water with the tidal water of the sea. The name means Crocodile Lake, a name given presumably because it once harboured crocodiles, and these cannot exist excepting in fresh water or the mainly fresh-water edges of the sea.

Was the Crossing achieved where now the waters of Lake Timsah lie? Or was the march southward further than that? The conditions that prevailed at Timsah doubtless prevailed in the region where now the waters of the Bitter Lakes lie. Was the Crossing achieved there? It could hardly have been achieved any further south, for we are approaching waters too deep. If only it could be established where Pi-hahiroth was, and Migdol, and Baal-Zephon, the question would be answered. But it has not been, and it seems it will not be.

The indefatigable Naville by a too brilliant process has placed Pi-hahiroth at the site of a small hill called Jebel Mariam, on the south-western edge of Lake Timsah. But his

successors are less than satisfied. Migdol offers no encouragement at all. It is a Hebrew word meaning nothing more specific than tower. There were many towers. Baal-Zephon is not more helpful. We learn from the word that some Baal, some Phoenician idol, had managed to create a cult for himself somewhere in these border regions. But where? Where Pi-hahiroth was, where Migdol was; we are back where we started from. Pick out a grove of palms for yourself and call it Pi-hahiroth. Pick out a hillock of sand and call it Migdol. Take the southward road from Timsah to Suez. At some point close your eyes. At some point open them again. You will be at the place where the waters were divided. No-one will be able to decide against you that you are not.

So we drove southward along the exemplary Canal road down the western bank of Lake Timsah, where once the crocodile swarmed, or it may be they were worshipped by the dwellers on its shores. What has happened to the crocodiles, for there are none there now? They seem to have disappeared ages before Lesseps flooded the lake with salt water. It has been suggested that they disappeared because the gazelles they fed on disappeared, and the gazelles disappeared because the herbage they, in their turn, fed on, was obliterated by the camel. It sounds a little circuitous. We heard another romantic suggestion. At the foot of the lake lies a small village called Tusun, where a great many fossils of the meocene tertiary formation have been discovered. Were the crocodiles a dim reminiscence of those primordial creatures? That mirage air breeds most strange speculation.

The lake condensed out of the blue exhalation it had seemed into unbelievably blue water, or rather into a patch-work and succession of unbelievably blue waters, not one of which was easier to believe than any of the others. A felucca laden with golden straw heeled over towards a golden beach. Fishing-nets hung out to dry on low posts with fish-scales

like golden guineas glittering at the crossing of the threads. On our right, thinly extended a grove of oranges backed by black palms. Behind the palms wallowed the camel-coloured hills.

At a point where the lake narrows into a neck of water a hillock stands, which the Arabs call Gebel Maryam. It was at this place, they say, that Maryam, or Miriam, spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, and was afflicted with leprosy and was condemned to stay outside the precincts of the camp for seven days. That, clearly, was the camp at Pi-hahiroth, for there was no other camp between Etham and the Crossing. On the other hand, it is related she did exactly the same thing some time later at the camp of Hazereth, over in Sinai, with the same unhappy result, the sole difference being that this time she involved Aaron in the family squabble. It seems likely the Arab legend merely anticipates the later occurrence, but the fact is clearly established that Miriam disliked her sister-in-law, and the trouble may well have started here.

We learned in Ismailieh that the Gebel Maryam was renamed the Montagne de Marie by the engineer, Lesseps. But that was not, as it seems, a tribute to the prophetess. The Marie thus honoured was a beautiful young American lady who came to inspect the canal works at an early stage in their history. The Gebel Maryam, or, alternatively, the Montagne de Marie, is to-day crested by a fine double pylon in pink granite, which commemorates the heroic defence of the Suez Canal against the Turks in the Great War.

“And that, of course, is Pi-hahiroth,” said Lucas.

There was no reason why it should not be.

A little later we came to a square grass mound, which may or may not have been a gun-emplacement, to take a gun for the defence of the Canal. It was proposed that that was Migdol. It was not possible to dispute it. Finally Lucas registered Baal-Zephon.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “That won’t do.”

“What won’t do?”

"Only one of those places can be right. You can have your choice."

"Why?"

"It's quite clear from the text that the three places were on top of each other. Isn't that so?"

That was so. There was no argument.

The legend, as usual, does not help us to fix the localities. It is said of Pi-hahiroth that it was the place where Joseph had hidden one third of the wealth he had acquired during the seven years of plenty. He had given another portion to Pharaoh, and the third had been concealed in the wilderness, where it will not be found again till the day of the coming of the Messiah. The portion at Pi-hahiroth was located by the host and duly carried across the Red Sea. As for Baal-Zephon, it was a sanctuary marked by two colossi not wrought by man's hands, one male, the other female. When the Lord shattered all the idols of Egypt, He had of express purpose left untouched the double idol of Baal-Zephon, so that the Egyptians might falsely deem it would guard them in their pursuit of the Israelites into the sea. With regard to Migdol, there is silence.

So we left behind us the Lake of Crocodiles, and the village of Tusun, whose iguanodons and pterodactyls may still be extant in its name. We left behind us the amorphous ruin called the Serapeum, which may, or may not, have been a temple of Osiris. We approached the broad shoulder of the larger Bitter Lake and switched round upon its shore. At this place or at this place or at this place the great event may have occurred. Had we passed the place somewhere along the shore of Timsah, less than an hour ago? Or had we passed it at the Serapeum some minutes ago? Or was it here? Or would we unwittingly pass it by somewhere along the shore of the Bitter Lakes, the Larger, or the Lesser, perhaps?

It is a difficult problem, and it had produced aches in far more learned skulls than ours.

"Let's get out!" said Lucas. "We'll bathe! It'll do us good! And we'll see what we can make of it all, here on the spot!"

It was a sound idea, in each respect. It would be very pleasant to bathe, for it was hot, and we were sticky. And we sometimes found that the problems with which our whole journey was beset became less intractable when we got the soles of our feet down to it, and just listened, and just stared round.

We got out of the car.

"It's hot, Ibrahim," I said. "Would you like to stay here, or come down to the water?"

He preferred not to leave the car in the dangerous desert. "Here *quais*!" he said. His eyes were like small ripe blackberries. We walked over a hummocky stretch of foreshore for about a hundred yards, to where two huge tamarisks stood up like copper against the pale film of the lake. We lay with eyes shut against the intense sun for several minutes, doing nothing, thinking nothing. Then, firmly, "Let's get on with it!" I said. "Or we'll never get anywhere!" We proceeded to undress. Jim, it happens, is careful with his clothes. As he folded his coat, to place it in a neat heap among the tamarisk-roots, something slid out of his breast-pocket. It was a postcard, as black and glossy as the scarab that scurried away from under it. It looked an odd thing lying there, unexpected, abruptly outlined on the yellow sand. For a fraction of time which was outside computation, because it did not belong to time so much as to a mode of consciousness, I was not in Egypt any more, I was in a house in Rochester, with a cold wind driving along the Kentish hills.

"I've a collection of postcards, too," said Jim's father, a little diffidently. "I always bought postcards whenever we went to a new place. Would you like to see them?"

"Jim!" I said. I was in Egypt again. The waters of the lake were like a blue fire. The postcard lay on the sand, black and glossy as a scarab, or a lump of coal.

"Yes?" asked Jim.

"What's that?"

"Oh, a postcard!" he said. He had not noticed it drop out of his pocket.

"Yes, I know. What is it?" My voice was a little dry and faint. Lucas looked a little anxiously at me out of the corner of his eye. The sun, perhaps. The sun had got to the back of my neck.

"I got it in Ismailieh to-day!" said Jim casually. He stooped and picked it up and looked at it again. "It's a plan of the Suez Canal and the Lakes," he went on. "It shows where the Red Sea Crossing was."

I turned away. "Take it from him, Lucas," I begged, so low he could hardly hear me.

"Yes," said Lucas. "But what on earth——"

I sat down a few feet from the others. "Tell me about it," I said.

"All right," said Lucas. "Though it won't burn you. It's one of those photo-plans. A bird's-eye view of the whole region."

"Yes?"

"It shows exactly where the Land of Goshen was. It would have saved us a lot of trouble, had we got it earlier. Like Roda Island——" Then he stopped. His mind had at last equated the two pieces of cardboard. He turned to Jim.

"You and your father," he said. "You ought to set up in business."

"Please, Lucas," I begged.

"All right. Here's Timsah. Here's the Bitter Lakes. Here's the line of the Crossing. Do you want to see?"

"No! Go on!"

"Here it is. Straight across the Great Bitter Lake. The line curves a bit southward."

"About where is the line?"

He had not heard me.

"About where is the line?"

He paused. He looked round, studying the contour of the lake. Then he studied the postcard.

STALEMATE IN ELLIM



“About where we are now, I should say.”

“Thank you.” I walked along the beach a few yards and came back.

“Jim,” I breathed. “Go on buying postcards, will you? Your father bought any number when he was in these parts.”

The weather now was not as it was then, when Moses was encamped here, before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-Zephon. All night long the wind from the north had been freshening. Now, in the grey dawn, the wind momently grew more frightful. There was a yellow edge to the clouds, as if they were made not out of vapour, but out of some solid thing.

Only an hour ago, a messenger had come in from the edge of Goshen. He had brought alarming news. Pharaoh was on his way. One of his Generals had had a victory in the west. For the time being the tide of the Libyan invasion was stemmed. Pharaoh was advancing eastward with all his horses and chariots. It seemed to him he had the Israelites at his mercy, they were entangled in the land, the wilderness had shut them in. He was burning to settle accounts with the Israelites, in that they had turned upon him when his hands were full elsewhere, and despoiled him, and under the pretence of going three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to their God, they sought to flee his land.

Things had come to a grim pass. Could the people be blamed if they went about among their tents, crying: “Because there were no graves in Egypt, has he taken us away to die in the wilderness?”

But now, as never before, Moses showed the mettle of the man he was. Neither the hysterical railing of the people nor the imminent danger from the chariots coming up towards him caused him a moment's tremor. Never before had he known such immutigable trust in the Lord, such confidence in his own destiny and the destiny of his people. And he went down to the sea's edge, and in the rain and the wind his cloak was wrapped about him as it might be his own

skin, and the scud torn from the leaping waves slapped his face like the flick of a kerchief.

And the sun rode the eastern clouds like a ship going down into the depths, and the wind did not decrease, but from moment to moment increased, and it was the time of the ebbing of the tide. And behold, in the narrow place, where there was always water, it was as if the water were being thrust southward as by the flat of a great hand, and a narrow pathway of sand was visible between eastern and western shores.

And looking at that thing, despite all the tumult, Moses recalled a quiet voice that spoke to him. He could not remember whether it was some learned doctor in the schools who had spoken to him in his boyhood long ago, or whether it was Jethro, his master, or some old shepherd wiseacre, years later in the desert. He only recalled the quiet voice telling a dream and a tale of a certain terrific wonder, of sea that became dry land and dry land that became sea. Once in three thousand years this wonder was. And as he looked, momently before his eyes the pathway of sand widened. And he was aware that the three thousandth year had come round again. And he lifted his voice to the Lord, and the tears mingled on his cheeks with the flung spray. "With a mighty hand, O Lord, with a mighty hand!" And he turned again to the people and assembled them. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry land.

And when the greater part of the host had crossed over, the vanguard of the Egyptians came to this place beside Baal-Zephon. And it seemed to the captains there had been a shifting of river-beds and sea-beds and the height of hills, such as sometimes happens with a great earthquaking, and orders were given to follow, to the horsemen and the charioteers. And when a multitude was already in the exposed bed of that shallow sea, it happened that the wind suddenly changed, and blew not from north to south but from south to north, blowing even as mightily as before. And that same moment was the moment of the turning of the tide. And the sea

came roaring in a flood-race upon the Egyptians, and wind and water whelmed them, and the sands were undermined by the deep thrust of the returning sea and boiled above them, so that the chariot wheels were dislodged from their axle-pins, and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.

And slowly the wind died and the sea died, and the bodies of the Egyptians with their raiment, and their horses with their bridles and saddles, tossed lazily in the trough of the sea, and for many days thereafter were washed up on the eastern and the western shores. And on the eastern shore, safe in the hollow of the Lord's hand, Moses stood and the singers gathered about him. And Miriam came, Miriam the prophetess, with her women. And they took timbrels and beat upon them and danced by the edge of the sea. And they sang the Lord's song.

*I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously :
The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.*

. The east wind wherewith the Lord parted the waters, it is said by the Talmud, is the instrument wherewith on all the great days of doom He chastiseth the nations. He brought the Deluge with it, He laid the tower of Babel low with it, it brought down in ruins Samaria, Jerusalem and Tyre. In the day of reckoning the stones of Rome will fall before it; and thereafter the wicked that dwell in that city, and in all cities, will be frozen with the blast of it, in the icy caverns of Gehenna.

There was some difficulty, it is reported, in the first stage of the Crossing. The twelve tribes were each so anxious for the honour of being the first to trust themselves in the deep waters, that even before Moses had spread forth his rod, the tribe of Benjamin leapt into the sea, which so angered the tribe of Judah (for the youngest so to take precedence) that Judah sprang after him, at the same time pelting Benjamin with stones. Both tribes were in grave danger of drowning, when the Lord bade Moses forthwith to hold out

splashing it up into our faces. It was not more than ankle-deep for a good way out.

And then suddenly we heard a voice. It seemed a voice we had never heard before. And yet we had. It was the voice of Ibrahim, quite shrill with shame and terror. He stood outlined against the sky high up the sandy slope between the road and the water's edge. He had moved only a few yards from the road, as if the spectacle that met his eyes shocked him as much as the sight of a child with his throat cut. His hands were waving frantically up and down, up and down, as if he would shake them off at the wrists. He was hooting like an outraged owl. His face was quite brick-red. He was not wearing his tarbush. He positively was not wearing his tarbush. He would not have believed it, but he looked far more undressed than we did.

“*Mish quais! Mish quais!*” he shrilled. “Not good! Not good!”

“It's fine!” we reassured him. “Come in and have a dip!”

“*Mish quais!* Police will come! Canal police!” He made a gesture as of handcuffs being slipped round wrists. “Take to prison! Come out!” he wept. “*Mish quais!*”

“Oh!” said Lucas. “Apparently there's a regulation about bathing. Must wear university costume!”

“It's a little hard,” I grumbled. “I can't even go bathing where my own people walked dry-shod through the sea! All right, Ibrahim!” I shouted. “We're coming!”

At this moment a head appeared on the skyline, and another, and another. Before long the whole skyline was palisaded with heads.

“It's odd where they've all come from,” I murmured, detaching a dry shirt from a wet skin. “The place was all one vast desert till a moment ago.”

“What do you expect,” said Lucas, “with Ibrahim semaphoring the War Office till he was blue?”

“I wonder who they can be?” asked Jim.

“The Egyptians!” I said. “Pharaoh and his Egyptians

coming up out of the West! We'd better get out of it as quick as we know how!"

"We'll have to take the Suez road," said Lucas. "It doesn't seem as if we can get across any other way!"

We dressed quickly and raced up to the car. Ibrahim was sitting at the wheel, in a state of complete collapse. The face that had been brick-red was now flour-white. A group of pitch-black idlers loitered in the vicinity, neither more nor less concerned than a group of idlers might be in Shaftesbury Avenue, or Union Square.

We got into the car. The car started forward like a greyhound out of a trap.

"I have an idea!" said Lucas.

"What?" I asked, trying to comb the sand out of my hair.

"I know Ibrahim's trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"His trouble with the police, I mean."

"Yes?"

"They must have got hold of him once for not bathing in university costume."

"You've got it," I said.

Ibrahim refused to smile, refused to talk. I wanted to stop the car to take a matchless photograph. He pretended not to have understood my pellucid Arabic. The sulkiness persisted for a long time, a good many kilometres. Then Jim nudged me with his elbow, conveying that I was to look at Ibrahim's face. It was all wreathed with smiles. His full small lips glistened like cherries. He began humming a lullaby to himself.

"What is it, Ibrahim? What are you so pleased about?"

The cherry-lips parted, showing the dazzling teeth.

"Me go home to-day. Go home to Cairo. Cairo *quais!* Here *mish quais!*" He made a comprehensive gesture, indicating the desert all round us.

"We've got forty years of desert ahead of us," I said.

"*Mish quais, desert!*" said Ibrahim, and resumed his lullaby.

§ 6

A few kilometres north of Suez the road passes from under the ægis of the Canal Company and at once breaks into a switchboard of ruts and bumps. It is a shaggy road, shaded by shaggy palms, with shaggy vegetables in the bordering fields. The road is pied and dappled with an unusually shaggy brand of camels.

The road explains why they are particularly proud of their railway at Suez, though any desert town is proud of having a railway. (A town does not cease to be a desert town because it is surrounded by desert sea.) They are prouder of their railway at Suez than of their port, for that is merely an appanage of the railway, at the end of a long stone pier. The main thoroughfare of Suez clasps the railway to itself, like a scabbard a precious sword. They publish picture post-cards of it, and call it *Le Grand Boulevard du Chemin de Fer*. The principal cafés are here, over against the bridges that cross the railway, where the Rue Colmar meets the Grand Boulevard. The principal hotels are here, too: the Bel Air and the Misr. The chief diversion of the townsmen is to sit at the cafés, or, in the cool of the evening, to walk along the boulevard, watching the trains come in and go out. If, at that same time, you make your way round by the sea, along the northern edge of the city, a more inspiring prospect awaits you. It is easy to ignore the pits in the road and the smell of drains. Ahead lies Sinai, exciting, menacing, bidding you come if you choose, but not on your own terms. Behind, against the west, the leonine hulk of Gebel Ataka lunges forward from the Egyptian massif. Between, the lilac waters heave, thinning down into reaches of hyacinth and corn-flower where the shallows are. It would be possible to construct here a promenade comparable with that at Naples or Rio de Janeiro. But it would be empty. The townsmen would still take their ease in the Grand Boulevard du Chemin de Fer, watching the nice trains.

We had always heard that in Suez you can only stay at the Bel Air Hotel, just as in Cairo you can only stay at Shepheard's. We had managed in Cairo not to stay in Shepheard's, so we thought it might be stimulating not to stay at the Bel Air. We drew up round the corner from the two hotels, and while I walked off round a few blocks to the post office, Lucas went in to the Misr to ask about rooms. When I returned several minutes later, Lucas and Jim were superintending luggage on the pavement outside the Bel Air.

"Other place full up," said Lucas sotto voce.

"But where's Ibrahim?" I said.

"Do you see that cloud of dust?" I pretended I knew the one he meant. "That's Ibrahim!"

"Yes," I said with sympathy. "I suppose he wanted to get off."

"He was a good driver," said Lucas elegiacally, "but a timid man."

"I wonder what the new men are going to be like," I speculated.

"And the new cars," Jim mused.

"Well, they'll be soldiers," Lucas pointed out.

"All spit and polish, I suppose," I said apprehensively.

"We'll know in a few days."

We had a drink on the open-air half of the terrace while they were taking our things upstairs. The other half was a sort of veranda billiard-room. If we looked to the right, we could see the Lost Englishmen playing billiards. If we looked to the left, we could see the railway-line. If we looked straight in front, we could see the Misr Hotel. It seemed very full.

"No room opposite, eh?" I asked.

"Chock-full, lying like sardines on the floor. The pilgrims to Mecca."

"The two caravans meet a moment," I mused. "And part again. In the steps of Mohammed. In the steps of Moses."

"Look at those old chaps there," said Jim, "by the railway. I suppose they're pilgrims too."

They were undoubtedly pilgrims, from Turkestan, perhaps, or further east. There was a group of about six, with half as many boys. They had a Mongolian type of face. They wore gaily coloured Russian knee-boots and corduroy velvet coats and breeches and embroidered velvet skull-caps.

As you looked, you saw the whole town was full of pilgrims, Syrians, Turks, North Africans, Bokharans, Egyptians.

"The old fellow at the Misr said they all hang out in different places. He has the Egyptians."

The Egyptians. At the Misr. I was looking straight across the street as Lucas spoke. Misr on a big sign. Beside it the same word in Arabic. Misr. The Egyptians. Suddenly my mind jumped the points. I had always known the word. In reading the week's portion from the Pentateuch as a small boy how often had I read of Misr, Misraim, Mizraim, the Land of Bondage. I thrilled with an odd excitement of recognition. As when once the train down the east coast of Sicily had stopped at a small station, and I read Hybla. And I saw bees busy among the flowers. Hybla. Honey of Hybla. And as once, when I went to London for the first time, and the tube train stopped at a station and I read: Piccadilly Circus. London. The West End. Theatres. Lights. Glamour. Piccadilly Circus.

So now I recognized Misr. Misraim. Mizraim. The Land of Bondage. The taskmaster's whip in the brick-fields. The Crossing of the Red Sea. In that moment the miracle, which I had till now thought of in terms of poetic symbolism, or of meteorological juxtapositions, became something intimate, peculiar to myself. I felt it not with my brain only, but with my marrow.

We went up to stow things away in our chests of drawers. We were staying in Suez for a few days, till the appointed hour when the Camel Corps cars arranged by Cairo should arrive for us from El Arish, and take us across into Sinai.

The Bel Air, though full of Lost Englishmen, is really a French provincial hotel. You might think yourself at the Hotel de Portugal et de l'Univers in Toulouse. Or the Hotel Bristol in Nantes. The food is like that. The rooms, running hot and cold water, are like that. Madame is like that. Only the servants are not like that, with their long white frocks and their red tarbushes and their coal-black faces. And, of course, the Englishmen are not like that.

Some of the Englishmen were in transit, like ourselves. Of these one or two had a slightly becalmed air, as if they had been in transit for a long time, and the right wind had not blown up yet. Others had a comparatively permanent air, as if they might be workers in wireless stations, or banks, or shipping offices. They managed, despite the *tête de veau à la vinaigrette*, to create about themselves the slightly wistful air of tennis-parties in Wimbledon, and young fellows crowding into sports cars with girls and going off to punt somewhere, with lots of cushions, and a portable gramophone, and a thermos flask and hard-boiled eggs. None of them looked as if they really wanted to be there, but one has to bear one's share of the white man's burden. We could not find out about them, of course. There was no-one there to introduce anyone to anyone.

But, of course, the Colonel in pale blue tweeds could dispense with such a formality. He was, after all, a Colonel, and we were only civilians. But I do not think he was taking advantage of his status. It was, we soon learned, as a writer he addressed himself to us. He came up after dinner that night. He waved at us a copy of the *Bourse Egyptienne*, a paper which is published in Cairo. The copy he held seemed only just to have arrived in Suez.

“How d'you do?” he said. “I've just been reading about this job you're doing. It's you, isn't it? I saw your name up on the board.”

“That's us,” I said.

We all rose. There was a certain clicking promptness

about our rising, which was a refluence from a war-time series of actions and reactions. He was a Colonel, or had been a Colonel. It was so manifestly impossible that he was, or had been, anything else, with that red face, that white hair, those bushy brows. He was wearing a suit of pale-blue tweed plus fours.

"Smith, the name!" he stated, with a short bow from the waist.

"How do you do, sir?" I said.

"How do you do, sir?" said the others.

"Colonel Smith!" he supplemented.

Lucas bowed this time, then returned to the perpendicular. Jim blushed. We all stood upright with our hands stiff by our sides. I felt it was as much as Lucas could do not to lift his hand up to the salute.

"Get on with your coffee," the Colonel ordered. "Don't mind me. I'll smoke my cigar. I was very interested. Very interested indeed. Have you seen this?" He held out the paper towards us, indicating an article with a forefinger.

"No," I said, "we haven't seen a newspaper for days."

I quickly glanced through the article. First they gave a brief account of our intended journey. Then they got on to the story of the postcard and Roda Island and the place where Moses was found in the bulrushes. It had tickled their fancy. I smiled wryly.

"Well, it was like that," I said.

"Very interesting. Very interesting indeed. Quite in my own line. Exactly in my own line. Was thinking of doing it myself one of these days."

"You must," I said cordially. "It's a grand journey."

"Oh no. Oh no. Much too busy at present. Got a book of my own on hand."

"Really, sir? You write?" I asked. I was about to go further: "May I ask what the book's about, sir?" He was taking so kindly an interest in our job the least I could do was to take an interest in his. But I did not. I saw the blue

eyes look up sharply from under the tufty white brows.
“ How interesting ! ” I said lamely.

“ What have you found out ? ” said the Colonel.

“ Found out ? ” I repeated. “ About what ? ”

The Colonel slapped the Cairo paper with the back of his hand. “ About this ? This Exodus business ? Which way did Moses and the other fellers go ? How did they do it ? ”

“ You mean which way they went ? ” I said a little foolishly. I did not quite know what he was after.

“ Of course ! Which way they went ! ” There was a note of impatience in his voice.

“ Well, I suppose along the Wadi Tumilat to somewhere just north of Lake Timsah. Is that what you mean, sir ? ” I asked anxiously.

My answers to date had not at all excited him. “ Go on ! Go on ! ”

“ And then they crossed the Red Sea somewhere. We took it somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Bitter Lakes ! ”

The butt of the cigar glowered red and black at us, like an inflamed eye with grit in it, opening and shutting.

“ And then—— ” I went on. I didn’t quite know where all this was leading to.

But the Colonel did.

“ And then you go down to Ayun Musa. That’s Marah. And then you go along the Wadi Gharandel. That’s Elim.”

“ Yes, yes,” I said. “ You seem to have made a deep study of the Exodus, sir ? ” Yet I felt a little anxious, somehow.

“ And then of course you go to Gebel Musa. That’s your Mount Sinai, isn’t it ? ”

Was I, or was I not, mistaken ? The man was sneering at me. Yes, definitely, he was sneering at me. But what was wrong about taking Mount Sinai as Mount Sinai ? A great many millions of people have been doing it for nearly two thousand years.

“ Yes, we go to Mount Sinai. And then—— ”

“ But good heavens, man ! ” the Colonel suddenly exploded.

"That's all been done before! Every inch of it! Mount Sinai! Everybody's Mount Sinai!"

"Yes, sir!" I hastened. "That's rather the point of it, in a way."

"But what *original* ideas have you on the subject? Don't you see? Mustn't write a book like this without having original ideas!"

"What sort do you mean, sir. If I may ask?"

"Oh, no, young man, no! Must find your original ideas for yourself!"

Lucas nudged me. "The Colonel means like Major Jarvis's book."

"Oh, I see! Oh, of course! You mean like Major Jarvis's book?"

"Oh yes, oh yes." The Colonel glowed all over. "That's a book, that is! That's a damn fine idea, that is! Didn't cross the Red Sea or the Bitter Lakes or any such darn nonsense! Crossed over the salt-pan, northern shore of Sinai! What's the name of the place?"

"Lake Bardawil!" we supplied.

"That's it! Darn good book!"

"It is!" we agreed. "Very scholarly. Very convincing. Written by a man who's lived on the spot for years!"

"That's what I mean by *original*!" said the Colonel. "Makes a book worth writing! Must have original ideas!"

"But that's not quite the way we approached it, if I may say so."

"What d'you mean?"

"It was the tradition that most interested us. We feel the tradition's as likely to be true as anything that can be found out at this date. And, in any case, it has a real truth of its own, just because it *is* the tradition." I was not finding all this too easy. My neck was getting a little hot.

"And you see, sir," Lucas helped me out. "We went through the alternative routes. And they're all rather dull. The traditional route is so beautiful and so exciting."

"You still haven't got the point," said the Colonel im-

placably. "It's not a matter of alternative routes. It's a matter of an original route."

I felt we were at cross-purposes. I would try to approach his point of view.

"Of course," I admitted, "we're doing our best to check up on the scholars in detail. Not that we pretend to be scholars. Far from it. But now and again you get the impression, for instance, that a scholar is trying to build up a new theory, not because he really believes in it, but merely because he wants to upset the theory of the man in front of him."

"Darn good thing!" the Colonel endorsed. "Makes books worth writing."

"And another thing. When you actually get on the spot, you sometimes realize for the first time the fellow's never been there. And never hinted that he's never been there, either."

"Who?"

"I mean the scholar, the one who's put out such a clever theory about such-and-such a place."

"A clever theory's better than a foolish theory," said the Colonel sternly. "And a darn sight better than no theory at all!"

I let out a sudden sharp breath. Something had died inside me. I was incapable of uttering another word.

Lucas came to the rescue. Something had died in him, too. He was not a junior officer any more. The Colonel was not a Colonel any more. The Colonel was just a rather cantankerous, rather sweet old gentleman, with two or three bees in his bonnet. "I think I see what you mean, Colonel Smith," he said quickly. The voice boded no good. "We have a theory or two, but naturally, we don't like to talk about them, before . . . before we bring out . . ." It did not seem necessary to finish the sentence.

The Colonel brightened. This was altogether a more reasonable sort of young man. Good feller, probably.

"Well, frankly, glad to hear it!" he announced.

"Oh, yes," Lucas continued. Then he leaned forward.

"Have you read the book by Lieutenant-Colonel Robertson?"

"No, I can't say I have. What's it about?"

"*On the Track of the Exodus*, it's called. I don't suppose it's had time to get out here yet."

"What's it got to say?"

"Very original," said Lucas. "It proves the Israelites were a marine people. They had a navy. That's how they crossed the Red Sea."

"What?" said the Colonel. "Bless my soul!"

"Yes!"

"Darn good idea! Bless my soul! Darn original!" There was a distinct note of envy in his voice.

"Not so original as our idea."

"What's your idea? That is to say——" He paused. "I wouldn't dream of butting in——"

"Not at all," Lucas assured him. "Not at all! We don't actually *believe* in our theory, of course!"

"Pah!" said the Colonel, waving away the suggestion that to believe in your theory matters much one way or the other.

"You know what marvellous craftsmen and builders and engineers the Egyptians were! Their colours, their metals and all that! Nobody's ever been able to touch them from that day to this!"

"Quite so!" agreed the Colonel.

"And above all, there's the Pyramids!"

"Ah, the Pyramids!" repeated the Colonel, in the solemn tone in which, when the toastmaster has said "The King!" one repeats "The King!" "Yes?" he went on.

"It's been said the Chinese invented aeroplanes four thousand years ago."

"Yes?"

"Well, it might have been the Egyptians, not the Chinese."

"Is there any evidence——"

"Evidence!" Lucas looked at him a little reproachfully. "The god Ptah was one of the most important of their

MANNA-BEARING TREE



deities, wasn't he? Ptah equals Hephaestus, equals Vulcan, the god of gadgets! Well, then!"

"Yes?"

"Well, what about that Ibis god that keeps on cropping up?"

The Colonel's blue eyes stood prominently out of his head.
"Well, what?"

Lucas bent forward still closer.

"Why shouldn't the Ibis be the secret hieroglyph for the aeroplane? Can anyone prove it wasn't?"

"Well?"

"That's how the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. In a fleet of aeroplanes!" said Lucas.

Colonel Smith pursed up his lips as if he was going to say something. Then he changed his mind. He said something else.

"Do you mind if I put that down?" His hand was already fumbling in his pocket for a note-book.

"By all means!" said Lucas magnanimously. "And another thing," he threw in for overweight. "That explains the cloud business, too. You remember? Where it says a cloud got between the Israelites and the Egyptians, so that the Egyptians couldn't see them? You see? The Israelites got up beyond the clouds. That's why the Egyptians couldn't see them!"

Colonel Smith was scratching away busily.

The pilgrims to Mohammed were becalmed for a few days, just as we pilgrims to Moses were. The ship for Jeddah had not arrived for them, nor the cars from El Arish for us. So we all went out to divert ourselves in the highways and byways of Suez. That sounds a little sinister, for Suez has an unpleasant name, and on the whole it is an unpleasant little town. But whether or not the town had been specially cleaned up for the pilgrims (for, after all, pilgrimage is one of the major acts in the Muslim creed, along with prayer, fasting and alms-giving) or whether the new Egyptian Govern-

ment is addressing itself seriously to the job of scavenging, we found Suez a proper little town, for the time being—about as proper as Malvern, but not so agreeable.

Most of the pilgrims joined the population in the chief local sport, train-watching. The knee-booted, velvet-coated Bokharans spent their time in the Rue Colmar, the principal shopping street. It was the hardware plus haberdashery shops they patronized, a type of shop only found in sea-ports. They sell shaving-soap and mackintoshes, hose-pipes, pins, pocket mirrors, shirts, deck-chairs, patent medicines, torch-lights, postcards, glass jewellery, musical instruments. The Bokharans bought imitation leather wallets and torchlights, which they kept on putting on and off with great delight. They also bought soft white collars, which also they put on and off with great delight, inside out and upside down. The richer ones lined their front pockets with clip pencils and fountain-pens. Around them the natives stood and jeered, at these outlanders, these cretins of the east. One astonishing sub-human creature almost straight out of the jungle winked knowingly at us, to confirm the kinship of us westerners in the face of this uncouth invasion from Tartary. Then he pushed a derisory noise through his thick lips, and shambled off, his arms almost sweeping the pavement. To the Bokharans not even a fly had buzzed. Not even the soft white collars, inside out and upside down, impaired their dignity.

We found our diversion in a circus. Some of the other pilgrims found their way there, too, notably a handful of grandes from Tunis. We went there twice and there they were, too, in the front row of the stalls, very fine and impassive. Their profiles were as delicate as alabaster, the hairs on cheek and chin looked as if each separately had been traced with a fine pen-point. I do not believe we saw them smile once, however funny the funny men were, or the songs of the singing women.

The Israelites making that earlier *haj* must, likewise, have allowed themselves a little relaxation from time to time. The spontaneous expression of their profoundest emotion was

by way of dancing with instruments, as now on the further shore of the Red Sea, as later, when David danced before the Ark. But they assuredly sang, and danced, and played upon instruments, the timbrel, and the harp, and the psaltery, on more pedestrian occasions. So they did before they emerged from the desert, and so they did again, now they were returning there. But they were something more now, this tribe that had crossed the Red Sea, than the tribe of half-nomadic Beduin that had settled in Goshen. They had acquired some, perhaps too many, of the arts of the people among whom they had settled. They had become conjurors and magicians. They had become men of brawn. They had become tumblers, it may be, and weight-lifters. They may well have put up a booth, a *Succah*, now and again, to pass the time away during those endless treks through the wilderness.

And, if they did, their *Succah* would have been not at all unlike that circus-booth in Suez on the waste plot by the railway-line. The circus attracted attention to itself by sending out specimens of its wares, to defile through the streets of the town. First came a band, wearing the most un-uniform uniform, with pipes and cornets and a euphonium and a big drum. Then came several of the comedians in their comic costumes, with painted noses or long false noses, and baggy trousers and funny footwear. Then came a magician with a long yellow robe and a pointed cap, and a youth with him, wearing a black mask and a red domino, apparently his *djinn*, his attendant sprite. They made magic antics as the procession moved, capering and mopping and mowing. Then came finally the *pièce de résistance*, six exceedingly fat girls in long white nightgowns and hennaed hair falling loose below their shoulders. They looked like a chariot-full of captive princesses dragged in a seedy triumph round one of the dingier frontier cities of the Roman Empire. And they were, in a sense, the victims of a triumph, their unveiledness exposed wantonly for all the male eyes of Suez to browse upon.

In every sense, the performance thus advertised was a

generous one. We arrived about nine, and it had already been going on for some hours; we did not leave till midnight, and it continued for a few hours more. It must be said there were long periods when it could not be decided whether the show was still going on, or whether it was an interval, but we were quite happy to look round. The circus was housed in an old and dilapidated marquee, with great rents in the roof through which first the full moon shone and then the bright stars, wheeling through a purple sky. The marquee was supported by four masts painted gaily white and blue. So were the seats, in the lower two divisions. There was a third division, a gallery separated from the respectable parts of the house by a barbed-wire entanglement. There the ragtag and bobtail was huddled, cracking monkey-nuts. The middle orders, in slightly soiled *djellabiyehs*, occupied the second tier. They sucked oranges. The best people, among whom we were included, occupied the lowest tier, the stalls. We wore European dress for the most part, though many of us wore tarbushes. Coffee was brought to us now and again on tin trays; or the grave hookah was set down before us. On one side of the entry, where the actors and animals appeared and disappeared, were three closely curtained boxes. In each a group of veiled women sat, silent, immobile. You could not tell whether they were looking at you or at the players. You could not tell whether they were bored or convulsed with laughter. They were a bit of a death's head at the feast, I thought.

The turns were fairly orthodox, for the most part. We had seen their like before. A lady suspended by her hair from a bolt in the cross-beams took off a series of garments and poured some water into a tumbler and drained it, at a quite impossible angle. A youth jumped through a frame bristling with dagger-points. There was a comic bull-fight, with donkey for bull. A lady in sequins sang songs. She had an odd bunged-up sort of face, as if somebody had been slapping it repeatedly with a wet towel. A funny man made ribald interruptions, and everyone laughed heartily, excepting the

Tunisian grandees, who turned away their pale and perfect profiles a little superciliously.

And then it was that the band of captive princesses came on. We had seen several of them singly, in other costumes, but now they came on all together exactly as we had seen them in the triumphal procession, wearing their long white night-gowns. They were, perhaps, not long nightgowns. It was the princesses themselves who were short—measuring as much across as up and down. It seemed to me that they were all in a condition which made it unwise for them to dance in public, and I ventured to say as much to a member of the audience sitting beside me. But he assured me I did not need to be solicitous, for Egyptians like their women to be large, for which reason they eat special foods, in great quantities. He assumed it was not like that in my country. The reverse was the case there, I said. Now a small imp bounded in and distributed a sort of tambourine among the princesses, which they shook to and fro, jingling the little brass clappers and striking the stretched skin from time to time with their fingers and elbows. Slowly the tempo increased and the jingling and the drumming became louder; and then the girls added their voices to the music they were making. And the jingling and the drumming and the singing became still louder, and then at last the girls danced. It was a strange singing and dancing, almost confined to one note and one movement, yet it had an insidious fascination. The elegants in the stalls, not less than the ragamuffins behind the barbed wire, swayed to it as the snake sways to the snake-charmer. I felt my own shoulders twitch and move to the compulsion of that song without tone and that dance without movement. And then Lucas seized my elbow and jerked me from that slow surrender. He had his pad on his knee and the tip of his pencil in his mouth. Then he removed the pencil and pointed it towards the performers.

“ Those tambourines! ” he said. “ I’m sure we saw something exactly like them in one of the text-books. Which was it? You remember? Tambourines! Timbrels! Miriam’s women! ”

Miriam's women! The words were like the cracking of a bough in my ears.

“ You can stay if you like! ” I said. “ I’m going out! ”

“ Where are you going? ” Lucas said.

“ Out by the sea! ” I answered. I thrust my way out of the circus as if I’d seen somebody I feared or hated there. Even the impassive Tunisians raised their arched brows.

I wanted to get out by the sea, to those earlier dancing-women on the further shore of the Red Sea. Tallest among them all, swiftest, the most ecstatic, danced Miriam, the sister of Moses. The sun had tanned her skin till it was wrinkled hard as leather. Her eyes shone like black pebbles, washed by the flying spray. Her wisps of grey hair were flung in the air about her as she danced. And as they danced, they beat upon the timbrel, they sang to the Lord together.

*Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously;
The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.*

We were expecting our cars at six o’clock the following morning, so we spent our last evening at Suez in the Anglo-American Stores in the Rue Colmar. The Stores is not only an enormous emporium of tinned food and fresh groceries and vegetables and bakery. It is also the principal café of the Lost Englishmen. They stay at the Bel Air and play billiards there, but they drink at the Anglo-American Stores. Here the atmosphere subtly changes. It is not sequestered and Wimbledon. It is rather Joseph Conrad and South Seas. Stores are being made up for parties going on voyages into mysterious waters or trekking into pathless wildernesses. Anything might happen from the Anglo-American Stores, from an expedition to the pearl-fishing grounds in the Red Sea to an expedition into the heart of Sinai to establish the true nature of Manna. Rather long-limbed Englishwomen in tweeds drink gin and vermouth. Rather less efficient Englishmen in flannels drink whisky and mop their foreheads. Small children hardly out of their swaddling-bands thrust at

you sheafs of lottery tickets, as little susceptible to the impatient gestures of denial as the flies in the corners of a cow's eye. Naked-footed Arab meat-vendors carry round on tin trays enormous pigs' heads, unbelievably pink. It is beyond all surmisal who buys them, for the Muslim must not, and the long-limbed Englishwomen have other ideas about house-keeping.

And there we sat, Lucas and Jim and I, making out our list of stores, which were to be ready for us when we brought the cars round next morning to load up. It was not an easy job, for we had not been able to get any clear information about the amount of food we could pick up in Sinai. Some informants said we could scrape up enough to exist on as we moved along, and we need only bring with us the more luxurious trappings, like cheese in silver paper and tinned fruits. Others said once we were launched in the desert, we could hope for nothing at all, nothing. Whatever water we might get would be brackish, and if not brackish, dangerous for our untutored stomachs. The difficulty was increased by the fact that Lucas and I belonged to two totally different schools of commissariat theory. I believe that it is better to err on the fat side. Lucas believes it is better to err on the lean side. I dislike running a risk of being either hungry or thirsty. I get petulant and show the worse sides of my character; unless the situation should get really desperate; in which case my face irradiates with a serene glow of martyrdom, which is probably more irritating than any amount of peevishness. Lucas likes running risks, because he knows that on the whole one picks up something to eat or drink somewhere, sooner or later, and that if one does not, it gives one the chance of showing the stuff one is made of. On this particular journey, I was haunted by pictures of our party with bloodshot eyes and purple lips and broken finger-nails, scrabbling for water in dried-up water-holes. Lucas had pictures of sheikhs slaying for our sake holocausts of mutton, embanked in pearl-white mounds of rice.

So the three of us put our heads together to settle the

question of stores, Lucas on one side of the table and I at the other, with Jim between us to strike a balance. There were moments of tension. It seemed to me that some diet more extensive than bully beef and dry bread would be palatable. It seemed to Lucas that to stock up as for a Lord Mayor's Banquet was to under-estimate the native resources of the most arid peninsula. The question of the tins of chops was an *impasse*. I thought them no luxury. Lucas did. Jim suggested one tin as a compromise. It seemed to me one tin was worse than none and I refused to have no tinned chops. At this point the young and energetic manager of the Anglo-American Stores was called in. He had had a great deal of experience in the equipment of such expeditions as ours, and he placed it at our disposal. The result was satisfactory. It is true we were a little hungry and thirsty once or twice, but that was because we were rather lavish occasionally with odd Beduin and odd monks and odd animals that took our fancy here and there. It is true that we did have a sheep or two killed for our benefit, so that fresh chops might well have taken the place of one, at least, of the tins. But we did nicely, on the whole. We were grateful to the Anglo-American manager.

"It would be awful if there were any hitch with the cars after all this trouble," said Jim, who had his moments of pessimism.

"No!" I said tersely. "There can be no hitch over those cars. Not with Major Hatton arranging things. I'd as soon believe in a hitch in the force of Gravitation, or the Binomial Theorem. As quick as the one and as sure as the other. No hitch!"

Lucas agreed with me. We two had met him at the Frontier Administration in Cairo, where he sat at a desk opposite a broad, fair, blue-eyed Scotsman, Major Wallace by name. Major Wallace was the legal expert of the department, Major Hatton the expert in direct action. The Frontiers Administration, which administers the Libyan and Khartum frontiers, as well as Sinai, had recently been taken over by the new Egyptian Government. It seemed to us that so long as

such men served it, the frontiers would be in a good way. If they should cease to serve it (and tried British servants of the Egyptian Government were being superseded weekly) we had a feeling that the young king, Faruk, would find the same sort of difficulties cropping up on his frontiers as those two illustrious predecessors of his, in whom we were specially interested, Rameses the Second and Menephtah.

Major Hatton was acting at the recommendation of the Government, to whose good offices a note from Sir Ronald Storrs had first recommended us. So was Major Hammersley, the new Governor of Sinai, who would actually be sending us our two cars from the Camel Corps dépôt in El Arish, the administrative centre of the province.

"No, there'll be no hitch!" Lucas decided. "Don't forget the Great War, either!"

The reference was to Major Hammersley. We had met him in the Frontiers office in Cairo, where he had come up to be inoculated against hydrophobia. (He had been bitten by one of his predecessor's adored dogs. We thought it no way for a well-brought-up dog to show that it still remembered its original owner with tenderness.) Major Hammersley and Lucas looked at each other for a moment or two. The one said "Salonica!" The other said "Struma Valley!" They had met a moment then, and not for a moment since then.

Taking it all in all, we felt the cars should be there next morning. For a minute or two the embers of the old debate glowed in their ashes: to travel by car, or not to travel by car. We had all known from the beginning it was another of our academic issues. It was impossible to do our journey excepting by car, considering the space we must cover in the time at our disposal, some months at most. Yet there was, admittedly, a certain impropriety about our doing the journey in motor-cars. Moses and the host did not. We ourselves would not have been able to do it even so lately as five or six years ago. The roads in Sinai are more or less as they were in the time of Moses. The tyres and springs

of cars have only just got to the point where travel has become feasible, excepting during and after rain, when it is often difficult or impossible.

Lucas would have liked to repeat the original conditions as closely as possible—namely, to trek on foot, with a pack-animal or two to carry a tent and stores. I reminded him it is recorded that the Prophet himself had travelled on an ass. He said that was on the reverse journey, from Midian to Egypt, not from Egypt to Midian. In any case, it would not be seemly for us to travel excepting as the humblest of the camp-followers. I pointed out it was a long way, but that did not impress him. His impulse was not really archaic. He has a natural feeling for discomfort. It was understood he was to have as many opportunities of being uncomfortable on foot as possible. He would not be interfered with.

Jim, who at home has a passion for cars, was all for camels here. He had a vague feeling that the original exodus was done on camels. But, chiefly, he thought riding on camels picturesque, a point of view he subsequently modified. As more than a sporadic means of transport, I vetoed the camel. I have travelled on camel-back in various deserts, and have each time disliked more than the time before the slouch and sudden brake and slump and dither. I am not sure I could have induced myself to make it a camel-journey, even if the host had travelled out of Egypt that way, and we had time enough to do the same thing.

But they did not, I insisted. The only camels in Egypt during the sojourn were a few pack-animals brought up in caravans, like those we read about in Genesis, bringing up spicery and balm and myrrh from Gilead. It was not till the Nabæatans imported the creature in large quantities many centuries later that the camel became a native in Egypt. Why, even so late as the time of Herodotus, I pointed out, the old man describes the camel as having four leg-bones and four knee-joints in its hind legs; which shows that the animal just wasn't in the picture, so far as the west was concerned, even so late as the fourth century B.C.

I thought that ought to settle the matter. But it did not. Jim thought it all rather pedantic. He said everyone knew the camel was the great desert animal, and one ought to travel by it. I admitted it was very good in the desert, but that was the least it could do about it, having itself largely created the desert by chewing down to the roots every green thing that dared to show its face there. That silenced him for a time. Then he came back again. He said, if people used the animal to travel in the desert it would have to take its food wherever it could find any; it could not pick and choose. On the whole, it seemed to me we had created a new variant of an old controversy: which came first, the camel or the desert?

It would have to be cars, we decided, though we would walk now and again, and take camels now and again. But what cars? British cars were not much in evidence in Cairo—at least, British cars specially adapted to desert travelling. We had memories of a French machine, a sort of tank or caterpillar car, that made a notable expedition across the Sahara; but we were told that was already a museum piece. It was on view at the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, in the same way as Pharaoh's chariot in the Museum in Cairo. The right sort of springing combined with the right sort of low-pressure tyre is good enough now, it seems, in almost any decently-built modern car. We met a racer who had won several races driving an Italian car from Cairo to a point in the desert and back again, though the most frightful scirocco weather. He thought we might like to take over his racing-car, but it did not seem the right vehicle, somehow, even though it would be useful if we ran into scirocco. We met an agent who made Kipling poems about an American car, its high clearance, its two transversal springs that take the place of the four longitudinal springs. And then the Frontiers Administration took us in hand, and it was arranged that the Camel Corps should supply us with two Ford trucks. They would call for us at the Bel Air at six o'clock one certain morning and take us over into Sinai.

I looked at my watch that night in the Anglo-American

stores, the matter of the tinned chops having been decided without rancour. It was nearly midnight. "We have all our packing to do," I said. "We must go."

But we did not leave for twenty minutes or more. It suddenly came on to rain with tropical fury, and we were only wearing shirts and trousers and light sandals.

"It's going to be pretty tough going in the wadis of Sinai to-morrow," said Lucas.

The rain came down like beating fists.

CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

THERE was a knock at my door an hour or two, it seemed, after I had closed my eyes. It was a firm knock, but not peremptory.

“Who’s that?” I said.

The door opened. A huge black man stood in the doorway, wearing a green turban, a khaki over-frock, a green sash round the frock and puttees under it. He had a sort of lanyard slung over both shoulders. There was a diamond-shaped flash of leopard skin on the side of the turban.

I rubbed my eyes and stared. It was exactly as if a door had opened at the back of a stage set. No, I was not dreaming. I realized what play the stage was set for. It was a pantomime: Aladdin. I was Aladdin. I had turned my ring. In another moment the huge black man would say:

*Behold, my lord, the Servant of the Ring!
What craves Aladdin? Ask me anything.*

But he did not.

“Mustapha!” he announced. “Umbasha! Camel Corps, number four company, sir!” He lifted his hand smartly to the side of his turban and brought it down again.

“That’s fine!” I stammered. “That’s fine!” I was not at all certain of the words with which a civilian acknowledges an umbasha, a corporal, of the Camel Corps, reporting for service. “I suppose it is——” I went on. “It is six o’clock, isn’t it?”

His hand went to the lanyard and tugged. I would not have been surprised, I more than half-expected, that when he pulled the lanyard free, there would be a property clock hanging from the end of it, as big as a cauliflower. It was not. It was an ordinary-sized Ingersoll.

"Just six o'clock, sir!"

"Awfully prompt! Most punctual!" I assured him, flinging off the bed-clothes a little guiltily. "Was up very late packing."

Not for him to criticize, but to serve. "Bags ready, sir?" he asked.

"Here they are, all together, in the corner of the room. The porters will take them down." I saw two or three sallow faces peeping round Mustapha's elbows.

"No, sir," said Mustapha. "We take."

It was quite clear that our well-being was in his hands henceforth, and in none other's. He turned and looked at the faces, not at all sternly. One moment they were there, the next they were not. They went out like match-flames.

He issued an order in Arabic. I heard heavy boots take two steps forward.

"Hassan, askari!" Mustapha announced. "Mohammed, askari!" He drew two or three paces aside.

Two soldiers of the Camel Corps stepped briskly up and took a door-post each, like two negroid caryatids. They wore the same uniform, excepting that they had a bandolier each, instead of a lanyard. Hassan was as handsome as any film-star, and not much darker. Mohammed was very dark. His shining gold tooth made him look still darker. He had four small parallel cuts down each cheek, as is the custom of the Dinka, a tribe in the Sudan. They both saluted. Then Mustapha gave another order. The two men came into the room and picked up the luggage. There was a lot of it and it was heavy. They carried it off as if it were so many brown-paper parcels.

We dressed and breakfasted and went down. A clear sun was climbing into a cloudless sky. The storm had lasted two or three hours, and then had stopped as abruptly as it began. The air smelled fresh and sweet as grass. The two Ford trucks, lifted high on their balloon tyres, were drawn up alongside the pavement. They looked as spick and span as

if they had been assembled on the spot, or had come to the hotel over a causeway specially laid down above the sea of mud in which the town was wallowing. The trucks were roofed over in front, with room for one beside the driver, or, at a close pinch, two, if the driver was not Mustapha. The open waggon behind was stuffed with canvas and rope-lashings. On the side of each truck were fastened a mattock and spade, and a brace of drinking-water bottles, covered with wet flannel. The mattock and spade looked bright and small and new, as if the idea was we would all play sand-pies together when it got cool. A brightly-polished brass socket to take a machine-gun was fixed into the dashboard. It did not contain a machine-gun, but a good-looking rifle was propped up beside each steering-wheel.

Mustapha and his men unashed the canvas, then stowed the luggage away deftly and firmly. It would have to be firm, considering the ground we were going to travel over. A space was left for the stores we were about to pick up. Mustapha got into the first car, I got in beside him. The two others got into the other car, with Hassan driving. Mohammed perched himself on top of the luggage, holding on to the roof with one hand. We waved a good-bye to Madame. Behind a window a red spectre hovered for one moment. It may have been Colonel Smith; it may have been the sun winking on the window-pane. We waved a good-bye to the red spectre. We went off and picked up our stores in the Rue Colmar, and bought a couple of crates of oranges in the market, and at last we were off travelling northward again, the way we had come, to El Kubri, to take the ferry across the Canal.

The road ran with wet mud like a sluice. The Arabs picked their way from pavement to pavement, with their flowing garments clasped to their stomachs, revealing white bloomers and hairy legs and socks supported round the calves by purple suspenders from Nottingham. Their dignity could not survive such exposure, any more than that of swans can when they

come waddling up from the margin of a lake. On the fringe of the shabby palm-grove at the edge of the town a family was at work hammering away at the ribs of a boat, high and dry on the canal-bank. "Noah!" I cried to Mustapha. "Noah!" But he did not get what I meant. Perhaps they pronounce the name differently in Arabic. No-one but Noah in all Suez understood. Last night's rain-shower, it seemed, had been a final warning. Look out! The Deluge is coming! The hammers clanged and flashed in the clear air.

In half an hour or so we reached the police-post at El Kubri. We were crossing from one continent into another, but the examination of papers was perfunctory. There could be no mischief in travellers who moved in the mild beam of Mustapha's eye. The cars were run on to the ferry-boats. We stationed ourselves before the deck-house and looked over to Sinai across the narrowing ribbon of water.

"And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea; and they went out into the wilderness of Shur." Here was Shur, that dreadful wilderness, ahead of us, and stretching north and south. The foot hardly moved, the legend says, but it stirred a snake or a lizard or a scorpion. So deadly those snakes were, if a bird flew even across their shadow, it fell out of the air stone-dead. I strained my eyes into the sand-dazzle, as if I might even now see the last of the stragglers plodding wretchedly southward. The ecstasy of the Crossing was over. The salt of the flung spray was caked in the hair and smarted in the split skin. The march was not more than a day or two, or a week or two, old, and already sandals were gaping open and the grit burned between the toes and under the toe-nails. If there were any desert prowlers following in the wake of these fliers from Egypt, they would by now already have gleaned a fair harvest, of gold cups and silver cups flung away because no water was in them, and fine Egyptian raiment lying where it had slipped from the shoulders, because it was too stifling wear.

The host had marched on. There were no stragglers, or

WRITINGS IN WADI MOKATTEB



the stragglers had been absorbed into the desert as completely as last night's rain. Some two or three hundred yards beyond the bank a line of tethered camels, some standing, some squatting, with their legs folded under them, were outlined against the sky. The men in charge were invisible in their bivouacs—all but one. We could make out a solitary figure staring towards us as we approached, his hand shading his eyes. Then he called out to his companions, not many yards away. Thin and sharp the voice came over to us, across the clear morning. The air had so little resistance, you felt the sound would travel any distance, in any direction, as the beam of a star travels.

“Camel Corps, number six, sir!” said Mustapha, affectionately.

The men came out of their tents in various stages of undress; one stooped to his puttees, one fastened his belt, another adjusted his turban.

There was a light thud as the ferry-boat came to. The sloping platform clicked on the ramp once or twice, then came to rest. We stepped ashore.

“It doesn't seem to have rained here for a hundred years,” said Jim. “It's like a miracle.”

“We are in Sinai,” I said. “A land of miracles.”

§ 2

Camel Corps number six lined itself up in front of its seven camels. No-one could have said they had not been drawn up, in full uniform, for hours. It produced an effect not unlike a squad of firemen lounging at the doors of a suburban fire-station. One moment they are in their shirt-sleeves. A moment later they have their helmets and all their accoutrements on, and the engine is panting to get away.

The umbasha stood a little in front of the others. All were at the salute. We were being driven in Government cars and we were English. It was necessary, therefore, to greet us

with some formality. That endured for five seconds, then they relaxed. After all, we were civilians. We shook hands all round.

We were then introduced to the camels, who acknowledged us with a great diversity of noises: a grunting, a snorting, a braying, and, noticeably, a gurgling, like the water in the bowl of a hookah. They were light-grey riding-camels, every inch of them quick with speed and tough with strength. They had the big nostrils which are a mark of breed. As the animals breathed, the nostrils, tufty with stubby hairs, opened and shut like the eyes of chimpanzees. Some of the beasts were ordered to get up on all fours, which they did with little grace. The others continued to chew the cud, staring at us as if from under the rims of pince-nez. In the action of chewing, the lower jaw moved steadily from left to right and back again, each movement lifting the corresponding section of the pendulous upper hare-lip. The teeth were in size and colour like a set of old dominoes in some fly-blown café.

I looked a little guiltily in Jim's direction. He was talking to the camels and patting their noses as if they were horses in a stable, or big dogs. He would do the same with the major carnivora, and with the same results. For the first time in my life I heard camels making agreeable noises, or, at least, noises less disagreeable than they normally make. Actually face to face with camels like these, one forgot the practical aspects of the case, and found it impossible not to regret for some moments that the journey was being done in Ford trucks.

I felt I had to say something about it. "Would you like to scrap the Fords, Jim," I said, "and get on these?"

He turned and looked at Hassan, by whose side he had been driving, and Mohammed, and Mustapha. "No, I think they'll do fine," he said. "*Quais*, Hassan?" he called out.

Hassan's lips parted and there was a flash of fine teeth. "*Quais*, Mistu Jim!" smiled Hassan.

I realized that Hassan and Mustapha and Mohammed already felt towards him as horses do, or dogs, or these camels that were gurgling at him at this moment, while he tugged their ears.

"Well, we'd better go," I said, "or we'll be getting thirsty. There's no water till we get to Marah."

Moses was wandering southward, for indeed, he could not be wandering any other way. He had made the direct move to Canaan, and the Lord had turned him back. His destination was Mount Sinai. After crossing the Red Sea, it would have been possible for him to make due eastward towards the great limestone plateau, now called Et Tih, which occupies the northern half of the peninsula. Thence, though it would have been extremely difficult going, he could have made southward for Mount Sinai.

But he did not go eastward, then southward, for it is impossible to work out the narrative as we have it, on those terms. He went due southward, in the desert between the hills and the sea, as any traveller for Mount Sinai would travel at this day. It is clearly said, moreover, that before reaching the Mountain, he encamped by the sea, wherever the actual place of encampment was. It was only then, after some days' or weeks' marching, he turned inland toward the east.

I say some days' or some weeks' marching, and it may, of course, equally well have been some months.

The commentators go to a lot of useless trouble, it seems to me, working out distances and stopping-places in terms of the numbers of days' march given in the narrative. We learn, for instance, that the journey between the place of the Crossing and Marah, the first stopping-place, was three days. We learn that the next stage was Elim, where there were twelve springs and threescore and ten palm-trees. But it is really not necessary to believe that three days as measured by the clock are meant, any more than it is necessary to believe so many springs and so many palms as numbered in an ord-

nance-survey are meant. The chronicler can no more avoid citing specific numbers than he can avoid symbols and metaphors and the other accustomed counters of poetry. If we say that the three days' march between the place of the Crossing and Marah meant that few days elapsed rather than many, we are possibly not far from the truth.

Where, then, was this Marah? Wherever the place of the Crossing was, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that it was the first water-supply on the journey southward, with water enough to supply the needs of a great company; and if that is so, the Arab identification of Marah with the oasis of Ayun Musa, seven miles south of Suez on the Sinai side, seems entirely probable.

So, bidding adieu to Camel Corps, number six company, we drove off southward for Marah, past the mud huts of the village of El Shatt, which has grown up on this side of the bridge-head. It looked as if the survivors had been playing games and piling up the sand in cubes, and people had gone to live there, while they held together. Then the wind would blow from the north and the cubes would fall on to the desert and lie like ant-hills, and the people would move on into the desert, with a camel or two and a goat or two, and their dozens of small babies with flies browsing placid in the corners of their eyes.

The host, and we in their wake, were still travelling through the desert of Shur, which is the desert of the Wall, the Wall of the plateau of Et Tih. The bones of beasts who died no pleasant death were the only decoration in the vast brown canvas: here the skull of a goat mysteriously dismembered from its body, there a sheep's skeleton. From time to time the anatomy of a camel's torso bumped itself up out of the flatness, so large and symmetrical that it seemed some family of desert pygmies had built it up to be the framework of a bivouac. Some three or four times during the day, no more, a small Beduin caravan passed, coming down from the hills,

or trekking north and south along the sea. It seemed a strange thing that there was any reason at all which made it more worth while to go in one direction than in another direction. They came up out of emptiness and went out into it, like ghosts. The telegraph-poles were reassuring in ways I had not known before. Living men had set them there. The fact that they were perpendicular was an excitement in this unabated horizontal world. Straight wires led between pole and pole. Here and there on the track the barbed wire of another civilized activity was wrapped round and round itself in rusty skeins that would never be unwound again. There had been fighting for the Canal here, between the Turks and ourselves. There has been a little more care taken over the human bones, or perhaps they still lie a few feet under the sand, and the wind that has covered, may some day uncover them again. On our left the mass of the Et Tih plateau outlined itself like a wainscoting on the lowest level of the sky. On our right, beyond the Gulf, the tawny mass of Gebel Ataka loomed seaward out of Egypt.

The car swerved more frequently off the track where small stones, sometimes small boulders, roughened the going. At odd intervals of a mile or more, a thorny acacia with morose courage thrust roots into this nothingness and grew there, and with no sustenance of dew or rain, became a sapling and became a tree. We passed on our right a sign-post that pointed down to a group of desolate white houses on the flat sea margin. "Lazaret," we read, "Quarantine." "Go quicker, Mustapha," I begged. If there were people quarantined in those white houses on the white sand, it was a tedium of horror I wanted thrust as soon as might be out of my mind. Hassan was driving ahead now. Mohammed still sat on the lashed canvas with his left arm flung behind him, holding on without effort to the roof of the driver's cabin. With instinctive suppleness his body gave to every bump of the car over rut or rock, so that he did not seem separate from the machine; or it seemed, rather, the machine was a pedestal support-

ing a heroic marble figure cut darkly against the calcined sky.

Then at last, like pillars of smoke that wavered slightly in the hot air, the first palm-trees of Ayun Musa appeared. Then their trunks condensed and their branches spread, like the petals of an opening flower. It was the oasis of all the story-books, almost incredible that in this stony vacuum it was no mirage. It was like a promise balanced precariously on the palm of a colossal hand. Believe, and you shall eat these fruits, and you shall drink these waters.

So we arrived at Ayun Musa, and went about the pools of water. And the host, arriving here long ago, drank of this water, but it was not to their taste, and they called it "Marah," which means "bitterness."

Now, it would have been imagined that they would have acclaimed any sort of water with enthusiasm, for they had been marching for some time through an odious desert, and by now their original stock of water must have been sorely depleted. But it had all been sweet water still, from the Nile or its tributary canals. They were still raw in desert-travelling. Marah was the first place in which they had to put up with such water as you can find in the desert. They thought it bitter, and they murmured. The time was often to come when they would have thought such water sweeter than milk and headier than wine.

So the people murmured. And Moses cried to the Lord; and the Lord bade him cast a certain tree into the water; which Moses did, and the waters became sweet.

In modern times travellers do not seem to have found a plant in these regions with such water-sweetening properties, though there is some reference to a kind of barberry so used, and Burckhardt suggests that the juice of the *gharkad* berry, which is found locally, may have the property, like the juice of the pomegranate, of improving brackish water. The legend says that it was a fragment of a laurel-tree on which

Moses inscribed the name of God. Josephus gives an extraordinary account of what happened.

“ So Moses took the top of a stick that lay down at his feet, and divided it in the middle, and made the section lengthways. Then . . . he bid the strongest man among them that stood there, to draw up water, and told them that when the greatest part was drawn up, the remainder would be fit to drink; so they laboured at it till the water was so agitated and purged as to be fit to drink.”

The process seems to have been unnecessarily complicated. It is quite evident that without infinite tact and wisdom Moses could never have led the Israelites through such protracted difficulties and dangers, all the more as the manifest favour the Lord had extended towards them had increased whatever they had of native querulousness and arrogance. It seems not at all impossible that, on this occasion, Moses threw into the waters a sprig, whether of barberry or laurel, and waited, for an hour or a day. He knew it was only a question of time how soon after the Israelites had drained to the dregs the skins of Nile water, they would find the waters of the oasis entirely drinkable.

The track down into Ayun Musa had deep pit-holes brimmed with last night's rain. The place was doubly an oasis. It not merely had its own water for the traveller, disposed in six pools, but it knew how to keep the sweeter rain-water, should any fall. We rested for a time on the edge of the largest pool in the shade of its hundred palms. The water was bubbling up from some spring at its centre and its millennial action had built a bank to be the brim of the pool's cup. A Bedu of incredible age leaned on a stick by the pool's edge and looked down into the water. Our coming did not disturb his contemplation, of images that were as much beyond divining as a babe's or an animal's. His face was lean as a lath, the pupils of his eyes seemed distended

across the whole socket. Over his tattered *djellabiyyeh* the tatters of some British Tommy's khaki coat were held together by two brass buttons. We offered him some fruit and coins; he held out a black clawlike hand for them, but he did not look towards us, or mutter a syllable. He leaned on his stick, and still looked down into the water, as if, though we were younger and our eyes sharper, his eyes had a cunning to see things that ours were blind to.

A foot cracked on the stalk of a palm-leaf. We turned. Mustapha stood a few yards away, Hassan and Mohammed a few yards further.

“Yes?” I asked.

Mustapha pointed to the two others, and made the motion as of lifting a cup to the mouth. “But yes,” I cried. “This is God’s water, not ours! Come and squat! This is neither Alabama nor Aldershot!” They understood the spirit of the remark and came close. Then the two younger men leant down by the water’s brim and drank. Mustapha did not drink. Perhaps it is an umbasha’s pride to go longer without drink than mere askaris. Having drunk his fill, Hassan threw a few crumbs into the water, and shoals of some dark-hued fish, some three or four inches long, came up to dispute this manna fallen from heaven.

“We’ll have to drink, too,” I said. It did not seem proper not to drink, after the prophet had sweetened the waters.

“I’ve drunk already,” said Lucas. “I was rather thirsty.”

“Must I drink?” asked Jim.

The water was warm and a little brackish, not too bad to drink at a pinch, but it was time for another sprig of barberry or laurel to sweeten it.

We went deeper into the oasis gardens. A few Beduin huts were pitched here and there, with plaitings of palm-leaves eking out the lengths of black goat-hair. There were many goats and a few camels, safely tethered. Where they were not tethered, the young palms were protected by hedges of cactus or tamarisk. In a few places they were even protected

by cinctures of barbed wire. It was oddly gratifying to find some use of the stuff made somewhere in those vast acreages where the War had left behind it the most obstinately useless form of its litter. Some lengths of rail still lay about, from the narrow-gauge railway that had connected Ayun Musa with Suez during the War.

The men of the oasis had clearly gone to find some pasturage for their beasts, the first grazing of the new year. Except for the old pool-watcher, only females were left behind. Six tiny girls twittered and flashed about our feet, like some bird that hardly rises above ground-level as it flies. Their loose black gowns spread round them like wings. Their feet looked rather lizard-like than bird-like, with their wrinkled encrustations which had never had more than an accidental contact with water. Their eyes were like glass, very lovely, but still not wholly human. They wore bracelets and anklets of some cheap silver alloy, and blue beads to avert the evil eye. The fear of the evil eye was much in evidence throughout the oasis. We met their mother soon, in a rather grander hut than the others, put together out of boxwood as well as reeds and goat-hair. The mother, too, wore blue beads, and strings of shells also, and red coral, and amber, all to avert the evil eye. Her hair, twisted into a sort of unicorn's horn, projected straight towards us from her forehead, to break up whatever evil we bore with us. So multiply protected, she allowed herself to show how she wove the goat-hair with which her men covered themselves at night when they were out foraging for pasture. At each end of her frame, two sticks were held down in the ground by iron pegs; the threads were extended between the pairs of sticks. The wool was wound round a further stick used as a shuttle, and threaded through a pierced deer-horn. Her face and hands were so closely tattooed there were not more than a few centimetres of unmarked skin left. She passed the shuttle swiftly from side to side of her frame and smiled in the pride of her talent. We entered the hut. A small white cat in a corner arched its

back and spat. A number of gay rugs, woven by herself and her girls, were heaped together in a corner. Suspended from a rail on a tent-pole hung a scarlet-and-maroon camel-bag with motley fringes and tassels. For sole furniture was an old wooden box with the word Margarine assertively stamped on it. There was a large battered tin kettle, by the charcoal embers of a scooped-out hearth. There were a few rusty pots and pans, not for use, apparently, but for ornament. There was also a wooden kneading-bowl, which caused in us more emotion than the other objects. It was exactly the same thing as those kneading-troughs we read of, which, during all that haste of the night of Passover, the people bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders. Exactly as the women of Israel did, this woman of Ishmael mixed her flour, when she had any, in this bowl with water, and kneaded it with her hands until it became dough.

But times were lean now, it seemed, in Ayun Musa, for there was no bread to be seen anywhere. And they must have been getting lean, too, in Marah, by now. There was no more corn growing in this desert the host had come to, than there was corn growing in the salt sea. Here, it was true, was water, but what use was water without bread? What was the use of kneading-troughs with no dough of corn to knead in them? So a woman of the Israelites in her despondency threw away her kneading-trough for a woman of the Ishmaelites to pick it up. Unless corn fell down from heaven, the prospect seemed bleak enough. The leader, Moses, did not seem inclined to find any for them. Certain of the elders had been to speak with him at the door of his tent, and he had seemed blind and deaf to them a long time. It was as if he were in communion with some-one invisible. And then, when at last he turned to them and they spoke of bread, again he did not seem to hear them. He said if the people would diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord their God, the Lord would put no disease upon them, such as He had lately put upon the Egyptians. It was not possible

to get him to talk of other things than statutes and commandments. Shaking their heads doubtfully, the elders came away.

And next morning the trumpet sounded, the pillar of cloud stationed itself in the vanguard. Dismally the cavalcade went southward from Marah.

§ 3

As the day lengthened, cloud came into the sky, and trees and hills lost the precision of their contour, as if a humidity were in the air. On our right hand, where the sea flanked the desert, a succession of mirages bewildered and enchanted us. This was no longer the Red Sea, it was the English Channel, with the white cliffs standing sheer in green waters, crested with turf and thyme. This was no longer the English Channel. It was the marble panelling of some cathedral vaster than St. Peter's, panels of lapis lazuli and malachite and obsidian, with all the graining of fine stone and all the fluidity of mist. Beyond St. Peter's, a pool ringed round with palms winked into the sky. From the pool a channel ran into a wider water, with four huge whale-shaped hummocks playing tricks with each other, now lightly clicking and rebounding like ice-floes, now fusing into one like water flowing into one basin from various sources. On our left hand, the dun slopes of Et Tih perpetually paraded. Ahead of us now appeared at last the southern bastion of the desert of Shur, the lion-like mountain called Gebel Faraun, the Hill of Pharaoh, stretching forth its colossal paws into the sea.

Some two hours distance southward from Ayun Musa, in the footsteps of Et Tih, about seven miles from the coast, travellers report the existence of a well of bitter water, which the natives call Hawwarah. Those who place the Crossing near Suez have identified Hawwarah with Marah; for Ayun Musa, they say, would in that case be too near the place of the Crossing. But that, it would seem, if it is any argument at all, is an argument for placing the Crossing at some fair

distance northward, say in the region of the Bitter Lakes. And intrinsically it is less likely that a multitude quenched its thirst at a single bitter spring, even if miraculously sweetened, than at a chain of deep pools. None the less, we yielded to a sudden impulse to plough our way the several miles across the desert, and the several miles back, in order to take the measure of this alternative Marah. We had trudged no more than a mile across stone and sand, when a few thoughts stood clear in our minds. One: a mile of desert is not as other miles. Two: we were, in fact, convinced that if Marah was either Ayan Musa or Hawwarah, it was far likelier to be the first. Three: we realized that it was neither possible nor, if it were possible, wise to attempt a variorum itinerary. We would not, for instance, go to any Mount Sinai on the further side of Akaba, in addition to the Mount Sinai in the peninsula, seeing that the traditional mountain has as much truth and poetry as we hoped for. So we turned back from Hawwarah in the rough rhinoceros hills, and rejoined Mustapha and Hassan and Mohammed, who had stood looking toward us, a little puzzled, a little alarmed, not at all sure whether or not they ought to turn into the desert after us, seeing we had said no word to them.

Now the hills began to close in upon our left hand. Sometimes the landscape seemed as if it were a spent thing, something that men had finished with and flung aside, like the slag-heaps of a mining-country. Sometimes it had the awful virginity of the crater-pocked moon. Over a humped dune southward I saw the sky pricked by a point of dark greenness and another and another.

“Look!” said Mustapha. “Wadi Gharandel!”

I started out of my somnolence.

“Wadi Gharandel?” I cried. “We’re at Elim, then!”

Mustapha did not know about Elim.

I put my head round the side of the car and shouted, “Wadi Gharandel! Elim!”

For it is generally taken that the watery tree-lined valley

which debouches from the foothills and runs down into the sea some fifty-four miles southwards from Suez, must be the place of the next encampment after Marah, Elim, "where were twelve springs of water, and three score and ten palm-trees."

We continued for some half-mile or so over a road which had become much more uneven, to a point where a transverse track led us between stunted clumps of tamarisk down into the wadi. We continued seaward for some quarter of a mile or so, then drew up.

The clump of palms that sheltered us was some half-dozen of the seventy that cooled the brows of the host. The runlets or pockets of water we looked down upon were some of the twelve springs. But it is not likely, as I have suggested earlier, that there were seventy palms, twelve springs. The poet is at work again singing the numbers poem. He sings of twelve springs, perhaps (as the Talmud suggests) because there are twelve tribes and of as many palm-trees as there are elders in Israel. He calls them "holy trees," "god trees," which would seem to be the meaning of "Elim" (for "el" means "god"). That may be because the grove that Moses encamped in was sacred to some local tree-deity, and all the "seventy" trees were so many tree-idols. But it is as likely that to Moses emerging again safely from the horrors of the desert, every tree was a fresh miracle, the rod of God blossoming in a new place.

The seventy were many more than seventy now, for the grove extends for several kilometres along the wadi, now in a rough line, now in untidy clumps. The springs, too, seemed more than twelve, as we looked down into the wadi, our heads pillow'd upon coats and boots, our limbs stretched to the sun. Last night's rain, which had disappeared from the face of the desert like mist from a mirror, had had a friendlier reception here, where it still lay about in ruts and holes, and ran about with the running streams.

After luncheon, we set off for a tour of exploration. From

a notice-board at the head of the wadi, we gathered that some distance down Gharandel, perhaps near the sea, there was an alabaster quarry. Alabaster had a cool and intriguing sound in this ashen desolation. We wondered dimly what sort of man it might be who quarried alabaster out of Sinai. Was it for export to Italy to make saints in the hill-towns? Did stone-cutters on the east side of New York cut alabaster from the matrix of Sinaitic cliffs to make lamps that would beam softly down on the symposia of Park Avenue millionaires? We might find out, we said, if the enterprise was still there; as it well might not be, for the sign-board was heeling over, and seemed not at all sure of itself. If it were there, we said to ourselves, it would be in the charge of some European, who might have tales to tell of the survival of Mosaic legend among the local Beduin. The place may be near enough the sea for us to bathe. But, more than all this, we wished to see more of Elim, to drink in our turn from one of the twelve springs.

"You stay here, Mustapha," I said. "We are going down the valley."

Mustapha would not have the three gentlemen walk. It was his duty to drive us, and he would drive us. It was a long wadi. Lucas demurred. It was about time he walked, he said. But he got in, and we drove off. The bed of the wadi became rougher as we went along. Now the sand was feet thick, now we bumped over huge boulders and into deep ruts, where we splashed the rain-pools high above the wheels. Now the streams came up from their secret places, copious enough, but smelling strongly of sulphur. Here and there the streams, deepened by the rain-water, stagnated in areas of marsh. Palms and tamarisk grew thick enough, but the yellow teeth of camels had made them look rather lopped and piebald for the most part. Here and there a thin coverlet of grass spread along the valley-bed. Clumps of reeds grew by the edges of pools. Once or twice a marsh-fowl clucked and clapped its wings.

It seemed to me it was getting a little dangerous to take the cars further. We had heard a good deal of the disastrous effects of rain on the surface of these wadi-beds. It was true that no wave a yard high was charging sea-ward, like a herd of wild horses, in a way that had been described to us more than once. But, then, the rain had stopped some twelve hours ago. It was the after-effects of rain that were to be looked for. What about marsh? What about quicksand?

The idea presented itself to Mustapha just about the same time. I saw him look anxiously down into the patch of marsh we were churning through. It was clear he wanted to take us as far along the valley as he dared. But he dared a moment too long. The churned mud hissed about the wheels. The wheels turned but the car stayed. We were stuck.

The other car drew up at a safe distance and we all got out. Then the three men started pushing and heaving. If pushing and heaving would do it, we thought another three pairs of hands would be helpful, but our offers of help only embarrassed them. Perhaps we would like to walk a little down the valley, they suggested, then by the time we came back they would be clear. As they spoke, they unfastened the mattocks and spades from their leather clips. They were not there merely to make sand-castles, after all. Jim and I looked at them a little enviously. It will be fine to walk, said Lucas.

“We'll be back in an hour,” I said.

For it would not do to start off too late. We proposed to spend the night at a place called Abu Zenima, which may well have been the host's next encampment. The text is a little difficult at this point. The narrative of the journey in Exodus takes the host straight on from Elim to “the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.” The narrative in Numbers tells us, however, that they “removed from Elim and encamped by the Red Sea,” and only then “removed from the Red Sea, and encamped in the wilderness

of Sin." The encampment by the sea, it is generally agreed, makes the journey a more practical proposition, in terms of distances to be covered and the nature of the ground. If they encamped by the sea, the reasonable place to camp in would be the beach now called Abu Zenima. That, therefore, was to be our night's resting-place.

"We go Abu Zenima one hour!" I informed Mustapha.

"*Quais*, Mistu Goddun!" said Mustapha, with the assurance of a porter at King's Cross. You might have thought the route was the L.N.E.R. to Edinburgh and the vehicle the Flying Scotsman.

We moved off down the wadi. The hills came closer and grew steeper as we moved, forlorn hills, white and grey, scurfed at their base by a wind-deposit of packed sand. It cannot be very far to the alabaster company, we said: perhaps round the next bend, or the bend after that. It was lovely to be walking among trees. We touched them. They were all real. Lovely, too, was the sound of flowing water. The streams ran in various channels down the wadi, sometimes joining, then parting company again. How exactly it is all described, I said, in the phrase: "the brooks of the water-courses"! We tried in several places if the water was sweet enough to drink. But last night's rain seemed to have churned up the mineral deposits in the wadi's bed. The water was sulphurous everywhere.

"That company must be straight on the sea," said Lucas.
"We'll bathe, after all."

"There's no company," I decided.

"There's no sea," said Jim.

"We have all this way to go back, and we've been nearly an hour," I pointed out.

We gave ourselves one more bend. There was neither company nor sea. We retraced our steps and a long time later, it seemed, reached the cars again. Both stood high and dry above the marsh.

"Abu Zenima!" I said. "Good-bye to Elim!"

THE ROCK OF THE STRIKING



"Good-bye to Elim!" the others said. They would have liked to bathe.

We set off up the wadi again. Each driver took his own course. There is no sure high-road in the seaward wadis of Sinai after rain, amid those tracts of marsh and banks of wet sand and shifting levels of gravel. Ten minutes after we set off, Hassan bogged his car. It slumped down to the wheel-spokes in two or three minutes. This looked more serious than before, when we had only gone down a few inches. The men looked shaken and anxious. They may have thought they were giving no good account of themselves and their cars on their first day with us. But things were more serious than that. The car was still sinking. Had we struck a quicksand? Mere pushing and heaving were not going to be enough now. Once more the men unloaded their mattocks and spades which they had only just wiped dry after the previous operation. We all pushed and heaved, we all dug and scraped. There was no question of refusing our help now. Minute by minute the car sank inch by inch, into a mud that reeked of sulphur and was black as pitch.

"Other car?" we suggested at one point. "Why not pull out by rope with other car?"

The men made a half-hearted attempt to carry out the suggestion. But clearly it would have required not a rope but a steel cable to tug that weight out of such tenacious mud. We went on pushing and heaving, digging and scraping. We had sunk up to our hubs by now.

"It's not good enough!" said Lucas. "What fools we are! So long as there's a continual supply of that black soup we'll never get clear! We must change the course of the stream!" He ran over to an exposed shelf of boulders and started frantically piling them cross-wise against the flow. "Get the spades, you two!" he cried out. "Make a dam of sand!"

"Yes!" I said, my heart coming up into my throat. It

was all a little terrifying. We were to dam the waters of Elim. We were to change the current of Biblical history.

"Perhaps it'll be all right!" I assured myself. "There were more terrific convulsions, back there, on the shore of the Red Sea!"

We had thrown off most of our clothes by now. The three soldiers still retained all theirs, with the punctiliose of soldiers, and Muslims. We staggered under the weight of stones. We banked up shovelfuls of sand. We scraped new trenches to tempt the stream to run their way. The warm mud oozed pleasantly between our toes. The sky filled with the flying flamingoes of sunset. A bird cheep-cheeped out of the tamarisk. We forgot Sinai, we forgot the Elim we sought to leave, the Red Sea encampment we had hoped to make for. We were small boys on Margate sands, terribly pre-occupied with buckets and spades. The reinforced dam of sand grew minute by minute. The inlets of the last insidious trickles were located and stuffed. The work at last was done.

"We've done it now, I think," said Lucas proudly. He looked down on his handiwork. He had changed the course of one of the twelve springs of Elim. "Let's go and help push now. Look, the car's already standing inches higher than it was before."

It was true. You could see the hub and some way down the spokes. But it was only the water that had been drained off. The black mud, which had lain there undisturbed for æons, gave no sign it would abandon the thing it had taken to itself. We pushed and heaved, pushed and heaved, till the sweat ran from our foreheads. The flamingoes had gone out of the sky. Dusk was upon us. It would be night soon.

"Take one car!" said Mustapha. "Other car tomorrow!"

"And Hassan?" asked Jim. "And Mohammed?"

"They stay!"

"I'll stay, too!" said Jim.

"I think it might alarm them at Abu Zenima," I said.

"All right." He was not happy.

There was no help for it, clearly. Some readjustment of the luggage was effected, then we got into our places, Lucas behind, Jim and I squeezed in beside Mustapha.

"Good night, Hassan, Mohammed!" we called out to them. Stars were already twinkling quite violently. We lurched off up the wadi towards the desert again, thrusting like a hippopotamus through the shallows. Dry roots cracked under our wheels like broom-pods. Branches of tamarisk and acacia scratched at our sides as if they would not let us go.

It was not pleasant leaving the two others behind. It was eerie enough by day, but the night would be cold as well.

"I suppose it's safe!" said Jim.

We had seen Beduin prowling about from time to time, but they were not likely to be mischievous, I thought. Hassan and Mohammed were big men, and they had their guns, of course. Besides, it was their job. They were used to this sort of thing.

"They'll be all right," I said. "They'll wrap themselves round in their coats, and take watch by turns. Then they'll be helped out, first thing to-morrow."

"By whom?"

"The company, I suppose."

"The company!" Jim snorted. It did seem rather a bad joke.

"Well, it's been a good day," I pointed out.

"I suppose it has," he admitted. "But we've been here a bit longer than we thought, eh?"

"Well, it's good-bye Elim now," I said. I settled myself to look at the nightmare worlds we were moment by moment creating, destroying, creating again. As we lurched from side to side, now the headlights lit up the shallow cliffs, now they fell like a stage spotlight plumb upon a palm-tree, flattening the trunk into cardboard and the branches into stretched

cloth. The tangle in the beds of the streams became a winter fauna, in the grip of a frost that petrified it for one moment, then released it again as the light rocked forward. The streams gleamed ahead of us like snakes of quicksilver, then blinked, and were gone. Over the pools the light spread like a warning.

It was hard going, to avoid the pools which might again bog us, and to avoid the boulders in the dry places which, despite all our high clearance, were too high for us to clear. Once and again it seemed a marsh had us. Once and again it seemed a boulder had poked itself up straight through the bottom of the car. Then, suddenly, in a place which had seemed as sound as most, the marsh had us. Desperately, before the grip was irretrievable, Mustapha threw his wheel over this way and that. But it was useless. As before, the churned mud hissed, the wheels turned round and round, the car did not go.

“*Afrit!*” said Mustapha, that imperturbable man. The word means devil. Not once before, all that trying day, and never again while we were with him, did we see his good humour ruffled by the faintest shadow.

“That’s all right, Mustapha!” we both hastened. “Bad luck! Push?”

He shook his head. He knew by the feel of it we were beyond pushing. None the less we tried. Once more we took off shoes and socks and rolled up trousers and squelched in the marsh and pushed. But it was no use. The marsh we had discomposed by our wheels and feet looked quite unpleasant now. We had evoked a plague of stinging insects that surrounded our heads in clouds and jabbed viciously at arms and feet.

“Please go in!” said Mustapha. “I call Hassan, Mohammed!”

The three of us got into the driving-seat. We huddled close for warmth. It was going to be a chilly night.

“I’m glad I brought that big blue sweater!” said Lucas.

“ Who said good-bye Elim? ” grinned Jim.

“ And who said you can’t have just as exciting a time in a car as on a camel? ” There was a brief silence. “ Or on your two feet? ”

“ Well, here we are, ” said Lucas. “ And here we stay. ”

“ Unless there’s a miracle, ” said Jim.

“ You never know, ” I ventured gloomily.

“ It’ll be a miracle if you don’t catch cold, ” said Lucas. “ You’re sniffing. Better take some aspirin. When we can get at it. ”

That was the one trouble about the cars. Everything had to be packed away and roped so carefully, that once you had put something away, it felt as remote as your “ Not Wanted on Voyage ” luggage on a sea-trip. There was not room for more than a few oranges and the camera in front, among the legs and gears.

“ Hassan! Hassan! ” called Mustapha. “ Hassan! Moha-a-amed! ” The sound was very forlorn echoing down the walls of the wadi. It grew fainter and fainter.

“ But it’s all great fun! ” said Jim.

We agreed. There, inside the car, the insects were not biting us. They were attacking the lenses of the headlamps and not making much progress. “ That is, it will be when we’ve had some food, ” I qualified. “ I’m hungry. ” Lucas looked up at the stars. He was not sure the mention of food was in good taste.

About three-quarters of an hour later, we heard the feet of the returning Sudanese, cracking on twigs and squelching in water. It was a welcome sound. We were getting a little cramped. Silence had fallen upon us. They seemed to be beating with branches the dry places opposite us, and trying them with their feet. Then they came over to the car. They had left everything but their rifles behind. Quietly, like people who know how to act when they see the inevitable, Hassan and Mohammed unashed the tarpaulin, got

hold of several pieces of luggage and boxes of stores, and strode over to the dry place.

“Please write to company!” said Mustapha.

“Good old company!” muttered Jim.

Some-one found a pencil, some-one found the back of an envelope. I got out of the car, stationed myself in the beam of the headlight, and put pencil to paper, standing knee-deep in marsh. I was grateful for that. The marsh was warm, and below the knees the insects could not get at me. They had increased in virulence astonishingly during the last forty-five minutes. They bit through my hair, they bit through my shirt. I wanted to get the letter-writing over. I wrote in French, which seemed the likeliest language. It was neither a clear nor a confident note. I had lost faith in that company, and had never had much. Hassan and Mohammed finished unloading the car, then they strode off down the wadi again. It all seemed like some fantastic game.

They had found a good place for us. It was bone-dry, with a few tamarisks in a rough semicircle round it, where they had spread out the tarpaulin. We took out all the sweaters and extra clothes we had with us—and we had a good deal, for we had been warned it was going to be exceedingly cold in the Convent of Mount Sinai. It looked like being cold enough here. A few nasty little breezes were already crawling about and sending up the sand in little uneasy puffs. We put the clothes on, manufactured pillows, stretched out the rugs, then made a rampart of suit-cases and kit-bags on the inner side of the bushes. In the meantime, at the open end of the semicircle, Mustapha had made a fire of tamarisk-wood. We foraged about and got a good deal more of the wood, for though it gave out a lot of heat, it burned up quickly. We were getting happier every moment. We were moving about, doing something. The fire crackled cheerfully and kept the insects away, they did not seem to like it. We then got a meal together. We had bread and cheese and hard-boiled eggs, and oranges and a big nip of brandy. Then we got down into

our beds. I had my aspirin. We urged Mustapha to take a rug or one of the heavy coats, for his stuff was in the other car. But he would not. He would be by the fire, he said.

He and the fire filled up the space at the open end of our horseshoe. He sat hunched forward, his chin on his chest, his arms folded. His rifle lay ready to hand beside him. He looked in his monumental turban like a carved watcher in the sepulchre of a Mameluke. We lay down and looked up into the stars.

Jim chuckled. He was enjoying it vastly. I, too, was filled with a serene satisfaction. Lucas was quite silent for some time. He was in the sixth heaven. He just missed complete ecstasy because there was a fire, and we had had something to eat and drink, and we had rugs.

"So we camp out in Elim, after all," I said finally. "The host would not let us go."

"We ought to camp out every night," said Jim.

"See how you feel about it to-morrow morning," I suggested. We sighed contentedly. We were quite warm. The stars were very large and active. "Look how high up Orion is," I murmured. "And Sirius. They're much lower down at home, of course. How odd they look up there!" We talked of stars and constellations. I told them how, when I was a boy, my friends and I would stay up all night on the outskirts of Doomington, looking at stars through my cheap telescope. "They were not all the same stars as these," I said.

"All stars same stars," murmured Jim sleepily.

Lucas said nothing. He was asleep. Mustapha had not moved. His head was still on his chest. But he was asleep, I think.

"Good-night, L.G.," said Jim, and moved on his side and was asleep.

Twelve springs of water. Threescore and ten palm-trees. How sweet the sound of running water is! In green England. In brown Sinai. Anywhere. My people heard it in this same place. They were lying where I lie now, their rugs

under them, their bundles behind them. The smoke of the tamarisk-fire spiralling up into the stars. Into Orion. Orion so high up, something very odd about that. Very odd. . . .

I was asleep, too.

I was awakened by the flashing of a torch into my eyes and a voice booming: "Get up now, by the Lord! Come on, all of you! By the Lord, you'll be frozen stiff! You'll be bitten to death, by the Lord, get up, will you!"

I would have tried to turn round and go to sleep again, for the interruption was as much like a dream as the dream I was engaged on. I was apparently dreaming that I was wrapped up in sweaters with my head against a rucksack in a most extraordinary place, all palm-trees, and stars, and feathery bushes, and the noise of water. Then somebody I had read about in a history book had come shouting into the dream. He was a Puritan. He had stepped straight out of the Barebones Parliament. "By the Lord!" he exclaimed, every third word. That came from reading the Bible, of course. We had all been reading the Bible, hard. It was very proper language, after all, here in Elim, where the host of Israel had pitched their tents. But why should Mustapha, Umbasha, Camel Corps number six company, put on a French beret and a leather jacket with a zip fastener, and an open white shirt and white shorts and white stockings?

But there *was* Mustapha, over against the smouldering embers of the fire, his head still on his chest, not having moved an inch from where he had been before. He was wearing the same clothes as before, his green turban, his khaki over-frock. He was fast asleep. He was snoring loudly. His rifle was by his side.

"By the Lord, mister!" The man in the leather-jacket cried again, tugging at my coverings. "Come along now. Just as you are! The men will pick up your things!"

Two new faces slid into the dream, one seemed a European, the other, an Arab face. The bodies attached to them were

going about collecting boxes, bags, boots. Then I recognized two faces, Hassan and Mohammed.

“Get up, Mistu Jim!” said Hassan, shaking him by the shoulder.

“Get up, Mistu Lucas!” said Mohammed.

Then I saw Mustapha get up out of his sleep, exactly as a cork bobs up to the surface, after having been kept down by pressure. A loud sound rolled in his moustache. In the same instant he had reached for his rifle and it was ready for action. A moment after lucidity came to him.

For me, too, the pieces of the puzzle slid about only a little longer, then some of them clicked into shape.

“So you’re from the company, sir?” I managed to bring out. “So it’s really there! It is so kind of you! I really don’t know how—”

“Don’t try, by the Lord!” he said. He picked up a handful of properties. “Make them come! This very moment!” He crashed off through the tamarisks towards the white glare of his car’s headlights.

“Are you awake, Jim?” Jim was on his feet, and his eyes were open. But he was moving round and round as in a trance. “Awake, Lucas?”

“Of course I’m awake,” Lucas said, like some-one under an anæsthetic.

Mustapha, completely himself again, Hassan and Mohammed, took us tenderly by the elbows. The two strangers gave a hand from behind. A minute later we were in a car. It was not one of our cars.

“Really,” I stammered. “I can’t say how grateful I am. Absolute strangers—”

“No strangers in the desert! By the Lord, you’d have been in a state by morning! Only too pleased! *Voyons!*”

Yes, of course. The man was French. I had been less than half conscious of an un-English distribution of certain accents. There was nothing else to show it was not an Englishman speaking.

"What excellent English you speak!" I said. "Monsieur—er—er." It was as if we had just met in a wagon-restaurant and one of us had passed the other the salt.

"M. Dufuriau!" he said.

"Like John Bunyan!" I specified. It was all very dream-like still. The streams, the boulders, the hands of trees that clutched at us as we passed by, the lights, the shadows, a quite incredible camel all wrapped round in branches like a wine-bottle in straw.

I did not dare to say anything, as I had no idea what shape my thought would take by the time it got to my tongue. There was a short circuit somewhere. None the less, I talked now and again, in a sort of runic chant, I think. M. Dufuriau talked a good deal. I recalled items of his conversation throughout the whole of the subsequent journey. He was an excellent Parisian. He was several sorts of Frenchman, as I reconstructed him, all of them of good vintage, something of Lyautey, something of Brillat Savarin. Every now and again the car ricocheted off a boulder and jumped a foot or two into the air. We were not to mind the bumps; we were not going by the track, he said. A track was useful for heavy juggernauts like our Fords, and even then they got bogged. His Renault could go anywhere. A tree thrust a hand out at us. We snapped it off at the wrist. Up the side of a house, if necessary. It had been his private car in Cairo. He had himself adapted it for use in the desert. He had done a hundred and fifty thousand miles in it. There was a touch of the Gascon in M. Dufuriau, too.

He was drinking his coffee, he said, when he heard two soldiers were waiting and insisted on presenting a note to him. No, by the Lord. No business to-night, not if all Cairo had been swallowed up in an earthquake. Then the word came through that three Englishmen were benighted in the Wadi Gharandel. What? Three Englishmen? Among all those insects and fevers? By the Lord, he had said, *vive l'Entente!* He had flung back his coffee in one gulp, a thing he detested to do, and had come out forthwith.

Then we plunged out of the wadi, up on the right somewhere. Or perhaps the wadi opened out here towards the sea. We found ourselves in a white flare of arc-lights lifted high on poles. We got out of the car and, following M. Dufuriau, passed through an engine-house. Or perhaps it was only a warehouse, and the engine was somewhere else. Chug, chug, the engine went, like the pulse of the dream itself, chug-chugging away. It filled the whole air. We were climbing a staircase cut in a cliff of solid alabaster. We were standing on a platform that looked down on a plain, spread about with huts, sheds, piles of materials. Somewhere beyond was the sea.

A door opened.

“ Go in, by the Lord ! ” said M. Dufuriau.

We were in a mess-room, with a long table and a number of folding chairs. Two young men were there, and an older one. The older one was studying blue-prints. He had red-rimmed eyes and red hair and looked up for a moment and looked down again, as if people benighted in Gharandel dropped in every ten minutes. A collection of magnificent moths was impaled on a door, each one with a pin in it.

“ We stick them there like that, just as they settle there,” said M. Dufuriau. “ A great country for moths.” That seemed to me faint praise. “ Would you like a nice cup of tea ? ”

A nice cup of tea. We were in the Corner House. We were in the Olde Englysshe Tea Roomes in Leamington Spa.

We had tea. Lucas and Jim were a little more wakeful. Lucas went for a walk soon. I slumped more heavily into the dream like the car into the marsh.

“ You must go to bed at once,” said M. Dufuriau.

Bed in the Wadi Gharandel. It seemed the apex of the miracle.

“ There you are ! ” I turned in triumph to Jim. “ And you laughed about it ? ”

“ About what ? ” he asked, puzzled.

" You said unless there's a miracle. We'd have to stay in the wadi unless there's a miracle. There you are!"

M. Dufuriau rose. " I think you ought to—" Then he stopped. The mouse came in. It came in from an inner room and squatted on the threshold and washed its face with a paw.

" That mouse again!" roared M. Dufuriau. " How long have I to put up with that mouse?" Apparently the mouse made that journey between the two rooms each night at the same time, and washed its face, and went back again. " Fetch my gun!" he shouted.

But no-one did. A debate went on for several minutes about that mouse, and whether it ought to be shot or not. We were completely forgotten during that time. The same debate went on night after night, and no-one ever brought M. Dufuriau's gun.

I think after that he took me to my bed. I only remember that some-one brought me a cup of tea, and it was not the same as the one the night before. It was put on a table by my bedside. Some-one drew the curtains. It was next day. The sunlight came tumbling in like a spate of blue water down a wadi.

We spent the morning with the General Lyautey aspect of M. Dufuriau, the colonist. We walked down to his quarry, which is a great chasm he has hewn out in the cliffs near the fringe of the sea. The loaded trucks of rock were going down full and coming back empty along a double trolley-line, as they had done all night long. On our way back, he called a Bedu workman over to him, and they talked for several minutes. Then he dismissed him.

" He says you will be all right," he said, and smiled.

" In what way?"

" You won't be bogged in the wadis again, he tells me, there will be no more rain."

" How does he know?"

The smile broadened. "But he says you must be careful in September, by the Lord."

"What of?"

"He means if you're still here; for there'll be rain then, and the wadis will be difficult again. The female rabbits are accepting the males because they know there will be grass for their young in September."

I held back a moment. "Do you believe him?"

His face became serious. "They never go wrong," he said.

"I wonder. Aren't there two sorts of mumbo-jumbo weather men—these, and the men in Greenwich?"

"Oh *those*!" He dismissed them with a click of the fingers.

We got into the car and drove across the scorching plain to Ras Mallab, the small roadstead where the tramp-steamers come to pick up his bricks of alabaster plaster. He had lifted his pier on a series of oil barrels filled with cement piled one on top of another. He was rather proud of that. He was proud, too, of a battered boat he had salvaged and was putting to rights. He was clearly an efficient and inventive person, but his attitude to it all was rather abstract and a little whimsical. He was not grim and Roman about it, not easy and English. He was very French. He had planted trees in the barren plain where the hutments were. A drink was brought out to us. For a moment we were transported from Sinai into the plane-shaded coolness of the Ile de la Cité in Paris.

Then we had lunch. Doubtless he put his best foot forward; the reputation of Gharandel was in his hands. None the less, it was astonishing to eat so flavoursome a meal in the desert. We had as an *hors d'œuvre* a vegetable of the turnip family pickled according to his own recipe. It sounds revolting and perhaps would have been, served any other way. We had stewed veal with carrots and celery and garlic. We had some mysterious vegetable as the salad dish, with the appearance of an artichoke, the taste of spinach, and a flavouring of curry. We had not seen it before and did not see it again. There

was an excellently compounded dish of bully beef and peas and rice. There was fresh Arab bread, there were oranges and bananas, there was coffee.

Coffee was a sacrament. M. Dufuriau would allow nothing to desecrate it, nothing short of another Mosaic expedition be-bogged in Gharandel. Then, the last drop drunk, our cigarettes smoked to the stubs, our conscience began to worry us. We had no right to keep a busy man so long from his affairs. Besides, our cars and the men had been waiting for us for some time. (It would have been impossible to guess from the appearance of any of them that they had all been at intimate grips with a black marsh for a great many hours recently.)

M. Dufuriau insisted he must be allowed to start us on our way to Abu Zenima, the encampment by the sea. He agreed that the host had doubtless gone back up the wadi from the encampment in Elim to the point where the Wadi Hawwarah enters it, and then had turned south into the uplands behind Gebel Faraun. We could see the mountain from his terrace, very firm and bold, standing out in the sea. The host could not have gone round this flank, it was clear, it was too steep for that. M. Dufuriau proposed that we should go by way of the foot of Gebel Faraun, and join the other route by a rarely-used track. It was tough but we could manage it. At the foot of the hill was a cave full of hot vapours and a boiling hot spring, called Hammam Faraun, the Baths of Pharaoh. The place was the scene of Pharaoh's last agonies. The agonies, moreover, still endured. According to the local legend, after he had pursued the Israelites into the Red Sea, he was drowned and his body was washed up at the foot of the mountain, where his soul alternately bakes in the cave and boils in the hot springs. They often come to tend their ailments here, and when they do, they seek to propitiate him with a sheep or goat. They dare not think what he might be up to, if they did not. (It is a fact worthy of mention that the shade of Menephtah was very nearly joined by the shade of

Napoleon Buonaparte; for it is recorded that, having made a reconnaissance of the road northward from Ayun Musa, he very nearly lost his life on his return journey, in the quick-sands between Ayun Musa and Suez—as Meneptah actually had done, according to the report, three thousand years earlier.)

We set out for Hammam Faraun in the three cars, the Renault first and the two Fords at a respectful distance, like two clumsy schoolboys who have let the class down recently. But if cars can smirk, they must have done a little smirking under their bonnets on the way to Hammam Faraun, for while they came through unscathed, their weight apparently being an advantage here, the Renault had to be heaved out of the shallow layer of sand half a dozen times. The Renault, apparently, was at its best in a wet wadi, where it was light enough to jump over the tops of things. There was a great variety of odd sea-creatures thrown up on the beach, which the frequent disembarkations gave us leisure to study. We picked up a number of gaily-finned small fish, red and golden and purple, a sea-horse or two, an inch-long cyclopic jelly-fish with one startling eye, and did no more than look at several much-bestreamered jelly-fish, which may, even in death, have not been so innocent as they looked, and very likely were not by any means dead.

We reached the hot cave at length and propitiated the ghost of Meneptah with some cigarettes, which was all we had available. The surface of the rock all round the opening was encrusted with the dried blood of sacrificed animals. We crawled inside and were not able to stay in for more than a few minutes, but thought regretfully that Meneptah must have got used to it by now. The boiling water, however, was really boiling, and had a strongly sulphurous smell. It should have involved him in real discomfort. It gushed out of a cleft in the hillside and flowed steaming into the sea, through a channel it had cut for itself and the wind had banked up with a dune of sand and gravel.

We said good-bye to M. Dufuriau at Hammam Faraun.

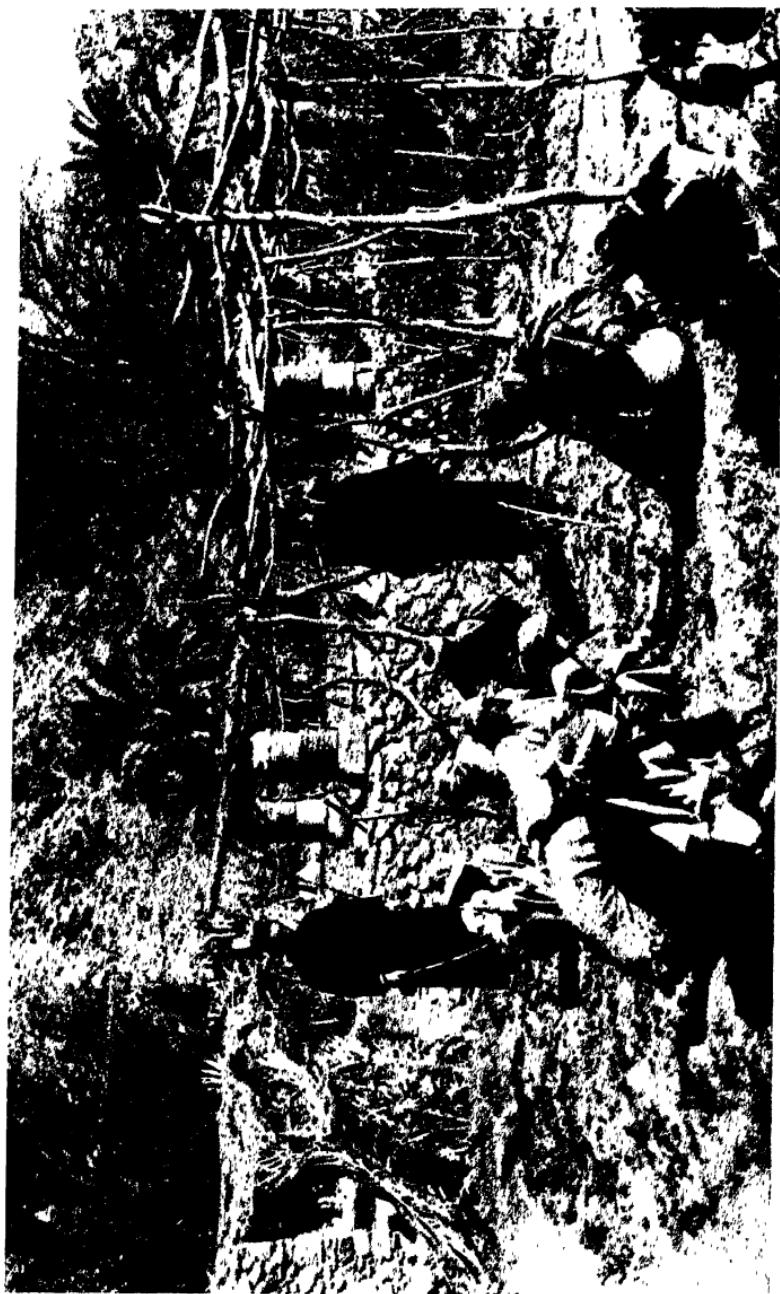
The Renault went off along the flats to Ras Mallab, we climbed a steep track into the wilderness behind Pharaoh's Mountain. As we looked round for the last time, the Renault was once more stationary. M. Dufuriau and his two men were pushing hard with the palms of their hands. Minute and far they were, the pushing men, the unbudging car. For all his size, M. Dufuriau looked, during that last moment, like one of his own impaled moths, his shirt and shorts pasted startlingly white at the junction of yellow sand and blue sea.

§ 4

The point at which the host on its way southward from Marah saw the first trees of Elim clumped on a hill is to-day called by the native "El Aar," the place of the shame, or the shameful murmuring, as M. Dufuriau expanded it. The Israelites were still too near to Egypt to know how to be properly grateful to a blade of grass. Some may have gone down into the wadi, others no doubt stayed there. And there, at El Aar, when Moses gave the signal for departure, they gathered their families together and set off into the neck of hills and valleys behind Gebel Faraun.

They had seen no such landscape on their journey as that which now encompassed them. It is a landscape with a wild beauty to the modern traveller, but it would have been wild and not beautiful to those dwellers by the sleek river. Every mad form of architectural extravaganza lined the wadis: baseless pyramids, disjointed minarets, towers that seemed suspended in mid-air, buttresses that buttressed nothing. Now and then it may have seemed to their fevered eyes that they were in Egypt again, and they gazed on the façade of some temple built by the earliest Pharaohs, with rank upon rank of god-man and god-beast carved out of the living rock, ascending to the dizzy cornice where the ravens swerved and settled. And the angle of the sunlight shifted, and they were in Sinai again, the barren track, the barren hill.

OASIS IN FEIRAN



The sunlight shifted out of higher heavens. The setting sun added fantasies of colour to the fantasies of shape, orange and crimson and deep-sea green and velvet indigo, all of them dusted over with a shimmer of gold powder. It was a world to which only stone and colour belonged. A shrub of broom, an acacia-tree, seemed an intrusion from another system.

So they and we moved down the Wadi Shebeikeh and came out into a vast amphitheatre, called the Wadi Tayibeh, which is the name of one of three wadis that meet there, debouching from walls of yellow and black and terra-cotta. Some three kilometres beyond, we came suddenly on an oasis, Tayibeh, the Pleasant, with thick reeds like bronze spears stuck in the cloven earth and tamarisk spun out of meticulous gold. A donkey lifted its head out of a stream as we approached. The sun gilded his wet muzzle as he opened his jaw and brayed. The hills brayed back at him. We too joined in the consonance—shout and echo. “Is this the road? *The road!*” “The road of Israel? *Of Israel!*” “The road to Sinai? *To Sinai!*”

Tayibeh contracted into a narrow defile, when the darkness hung back in the grottoes like lurking beasts. The blue thrust of the sea came out upon us suddenly, one blue, and another blue, and another, a whole sea in exquisite damascene of blue. Then, the moment we emerged, the substance of colour changed. It ceased to be compact like stone or metal. It became veined like flowers or leaves. Beyond, on the right hand, the hills of Africa defiled southward, in a shimmer of pink and lilac and royal purple, washed in the rose-water of the winter sunset. On the left hand the promontory of Abu Zenima defined the bay, with a gesture of arrest; so that the mind announced to itself: that is a good thing. Could the egg-shell stuff of the old skull endure much more? Or at the next onslaught of white-peony cloud and pink-daisy wave edges and primrose hill would the poor thing cave in?

So we removed from Elim and encamped by the Red Sea.

We were more fortunate than Israel. There was a Government rest-house on the beach where we knew we were expected. The government of their day was not so well disposed.

A couple of hours distance by car up another wadi than the one we had descended, a British company works a valuable manganese deposit. Here at Abu Zenima it has its own little port, its offices and various associated buildings, a hospital, bungalows, store-rooms and the rest. As we sped along the beach the lights twinkled out in the company compound like a series of constellations, more regular than those that were now spreading across the sky. The pier thrust a lance of light into the sea. A small cargo-boat was drawn up beyond it, within the low breakwater. We had a note with us to Mrs. Smith, the wife of the manager of the enterprise. It would be pleasant to learn from an Englishwoman how Sinai in its present aspect struck her. But to-morrow would do for that. We had allowed ourselves a day's rest to-morrow, to bathe and lie in the sun and look at notes and spread out maps.

The rest-house looked very pleasant as we approached it, an airy wooden bungalow, painted white, with green windows and doors. It was within a few yards of the sea. From quite a long distance off we saw that a woman was going down to the rest-house, a woman with no hat, and a shirt-blouse, and a tweed skirt, and firm shoes, very English. She must have seen our car coming up from the defiles, a long time before we saw her. It was clearly Mrs. Smith, who had heard we were due, coming down to welcome us. It was charming of her. We were very touched. It would be good to talk to a woman and an Englishwoman.

Our cars drew up at the rest-house just about the time she got there. I got out of the car and looked towards her as she approached, a smile of gratitude and greeting on my face. The lady came two or three yards nearer, then, apparently, she had come as far as she intended to come. There was no

awareness in her grey eyes that two cars had come out of the desert, that three Englishmen stood waiting, one of them smiling broadly straight at her. The lady turned and continued her promenade in a reverse direction. She was a tall lady. Her shoes had low heels.

The smile faded awkwardly from my face. We stood there silent for a minute or two. Then, I turned and said, in a slightly cracked voice: "I don't suppose that was Mrs. Smith, after all."

"No," Lucas agreed. "It probably isn't." He looked dispassionately from her clothes to mine and from mine to Jim's and his own. "Not that you can blame any unprotected female for being a little doubtful," he pointed out. "Can you, Jim?"

Jim was silent. He was sick with nostalgia.

"I'm not blaming her," I said. I felt pretty bad, too. "I would like to have had a chat with her, that's all. I don't suppose you meet an Englishwoman every day in the week out here. I wonder who she can be?" I ruminated. Then suddenly I realized who she was. It was almost certainly Miss Brown. M. Dufuriau had told me about her. He said that a few years ago the English colony of Abu Zenima with some visitors went on an excursion into the desert. And it was a rather misty day, so there was a lot of mirage about. And one of the women, a visitor, by name Miss Brown, wanted to do her face up, so she walked off to a tree in the distance. Unfortunately, it was a mirage tree, but the other members of the party were too embarrassed to let her know that. And so she walked and walked to get to the tree, but never got there, of course. Nobody ever saw her again.

Unless we did, the evening we turned up in Abu Zenima.

The rest-house was very airy and comfortable, with windows opening out on to the sea, and every room a shell, full of the sound of it. We had a royal meal of tinned salmon and bread and butter and cheese and tinned pineapple, and a

glass of *arrak* before, and tea during and after. A brown-eyed little attendant in a bright knitted skull-cap padded about attentively on bare feet. When he had finished one meal with us, Jim went and had another meal with Mustapha, Hassan and Mohammed, all of them digging their hands happily into a white mound of rice heaped up in a wooden bowl. He was not likely to go hungry.

I thought we ought to take no risks, either. I pointed out that we were setting out into the wilderness of Sin next day, and we ought to take advantage of the almost miraculous fact that the company had a canteen here, where we could replenish our supplies. Lucas pointed out a little acidly that our supplies did not want replenishing. M. Dufuriau had put us well on the credit side. Besides, it was precisely in the wilderness of Sin that manna and quails first dropped from heaven. It was grossly indecorous, it showed a grave lack of faith, to load up again at the threshold of the wilderness of Sin. I said it was more indecorous to hint to yourself that miracles might be vouchsafed for you. There was no surer way to frustrate them. So I went on my own to the canteen and laid in a great store of goat's cheeses and caramels wrapped in paper and tomatoes as big as turnips. Jim came, too, thinking he might get a preparation for the hair. He did not, but they offered him instead two live pigeons and a tiny black-and-white rabbit. The effect of that was, that when next night in the company compound they gave him pigeon for dinner, he turned green and had to go on the veranda for air.

All day long we lay on the beach or bathed, taking our ease as we hoped the host did, in that encampment by the sea which was so comparatively languorous that reference to it has escaped the narrators of Exodus altogether. We made heaps round ourselves of small coloured shells like jewels on Sheba's necklace, or large white shells each lovely enough for the Paphian to have taken it for her chariot. We saw the lights change from hour to hour on the hills and water that hemmed us in, till at last, in the cool of the evening, we left Sinai

behind, and took a journey to England, a kilometre or two across the beach.

First we played tennis, on a lawn the company people were rightly proud of, compounded out of fine sea sand, mud and beaten manganese; as proud as the French company at Gharandel was of its trees planted in regular rows. It was an instructive comparison in the mentalities of the two peoples. I did not succeed in hitting the balls accurately or often, and my contention that I could not distinguish between the balls we were playing with and the mirage balls refracted from some tennis-party in Ismailieh was ill received.

Then we dined, in a setting of chintz and *Love Locked Out*, and listened to the wireless, home news on the short wave for the benefit of such as us. In the Cup Replay, Watford and Millwall had drawn two-two, whereas St. Johnston's had scored five to Dunfermline's four. And then the dance music came on, and Henry Hall said he was going to play some of the good old-fashioned numbers, some might be a year or two old, or even more than that.

Oh, switch it off, said some-one, for we want nothing older than the newest in Sinai. But no-one switched it off, and the conversation continued athwart the saxophones. *Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch to-day.* The conversation was about another lady from Ohio, who came on a pilgrim ship to Abu Zenima, and was going as far as Tor. She said she had become a Mohammedan because of the marvellous sanitary ideas the Mohammedans had. And when she was told the same ideas were all in the Bible—"Oh, the Bible," she said. "I've never thought of reading that." *'Twas on the isle of Capri that I met her, 'neath the shade of an old walnut-tree.* Oh yes, we do our shopping with the Stores all the time. Most convenient. Once we just sent a chit along asking for sewing-machine, one, second-hand, in good condition, about three pounds; we got it with the next consignment. Once we asked for cook-general, one, also in good condition. We got that, too. We must tell you about that Greek lady. She was the wife of a

Greek captain, who had come to load up. We asked her to dinner, but conversation was not brisk, for she spoke no word of English and no-one spoke a word of Greek. An omelette was served that night, which she, it happened, tasted first, and then she took another mouthful. And when her hosts in turn tasted it, they discovered to their horror that the boy had made it with kerosene. But the Greek lady had taken a third and fourth mouthful. She gave every appearance of liking it, that heroic lady, apparently because she did not wish to embarrass her hosts. So her hosts, too, had to persevere with the kerosene-omelette to the last mouthful. But I was in the happy position of laying that particular ghost for them. *Hold that tiger, hold that tiger.* The Greeks, I said, impregnate their wine with resin, so it was quite possible that the lady was quite genuinely enjoying her kerosene-omelette. A small cat arched itself up against my legs, and purred. It had a tail that stood up stiff as a poker, as if it were screwed on somehow. How did that happen? I asked. Let's go out and have our coffee on the veranda. A huge tarantula walked into the room. One of the cargo-boats had brought it probably. The small cat came in and did not like the tarantula. They stalked each other for a few minutes, then got to grips, then came apart and stalked each other again. Then the cat had a sudden inspiration. It pounced on the tarantula with paw outstretched, flung it against the wall, stunned it and killed it. It had been stung in the tail. It was ill for a month, but we brought it round. The tail has always been like that since. Two lumps? Yes, please. Coffee on the veranda at Abu Zenima. Did I not read somewhere there was a sheikh of that name in these parts and the birds flew to and fro between Mecca and here with a perpetual supply of holy coffee?

Red sails in the sunset. But the red sails died out of the sunset long ago. The stars are pounding away in the sky. You can almost believe the chug-chug you hear is the noise they make; but it is not. It is the noise of the engines loading the cargo-steamer. The watchers of the host will soon be

going about among the tents waking up the elders of the companies. We must really be going now. Must you really? We're making for the wilderness of Sin. We're getting up at five o'clock. *He flies through the air with the greatest of ease.* Thank you so much. It was awfully nice of you to have us. Good night. Good night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ I

WE had a big day before us. We were roused at five and dressed quickly and set out for the neck of land which connects the promontory of Abu Zenima with the upper mountain. It is recorded that a certain pilgrim, so far back as the thirteenth century, celebrated the beauty of the shells he gathered on this beach. There was one shell lovelier than he saw, or, at least, recorded. The whole bay was one vast opalescent shell, kindling its concentric circles from moment to moment with fresh fires. The mountain on our left rose in a series of regular horizontal strata like those colossal stairways of old temples, the Ziggurats of Babylonia, the Teocallis of Mexico, which piled stair on stair on high, that the symbolic intention clearly was to attain the threshold of heaven.

We continued along a high-slung track for some ten kilometres, till we passed under the lee of Gebel Markha. From this point the mountains recede, leaving a long plain between themselves and the sea, some twenty kilometres in length and eight in width. The name of the plain is El Markha. It is that wilderness of Sin whither the congregation of the children of Israel came, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of Egypt.

The plain is stony and sterile. On an occasional drift-bank of sand some desert scrub somehow manages to find sustenance, too unappetizing for even the discouraged camel to do more than nibble at it. Further south the sand and pebbles give place to gravel and boulders. There is no vegetation at all. The mountains themselves have the air of keeping their distance. But where the earth itself is fixed in a rigor mortis, the fluid air, moving restlessly from level to level

between the varying temperatures of the exhalations from hill and plain and sea, boils with mirage like a cauldron. Mephitic vapours seemed to be rising from the sea, as they in truth do among the volcanic beds that link the Lipari islands. A mirage island would form, to be engulfed at once by the advancing and receding mist. The mists would collect again and advance to the assault of the base of a promontory and snap it off clean, leaving an edge of mountain jagged against the sky.

The host of Israel felt themselves irretrievably committed to the desert now, as they had not felt until they struck their tents and trekked off from the encampment by the Red Sea. There, at the place now called Abu Zenima, it may still have seemed possible to the doubters to disappear out of the ranks and make a dash for Egypt. It was not an impossible distance to Elim. From Elim they would somehow make their way back to the Red Sea. From the Red Sea it would be comparatively easy to get back home along the canals.

It was perhaps to deal with these very doubters that a lengthier halt was called at the Red Sea encampment. For a lengthier halt may well have been called there, if we are to treat literally the statement in Exodus that by the time the host reached the next station, the wilderness of Sin, a whole month had passed since the departure from Rameses. The distance between Rameses and the place of the Crossing was short and covered in haste. The distance between the Crossing and the wilderness of Sin was not much more than a hundred miles, most of it fairly level country. In what stations did they spend the greater part of the time not spent in marching? It can hardly have been elsewhere than in Elim-Wadi Gharandel and Abu Zenima.

From Abu Zenima, then, Moses sent out companies to bring in the truants, while the host waited. He had served a long apprenticeship in the desert and knew it better than those deluded ones did, who had been brick-makers for generations in the fields by the rivers. He knew the fate that was in store for them, removed from the Lord's care and his own. So he

sent out for them, and found it possible still to save some. Others it was not possible to save.

So they set forth again and came to the wilderness of Sin, already sad at heart. And here this hideous certainty of earth and phantasmagoric uncertainty of air must have been more heartbreaking than anything they had yet experienced. No wonder they began to see another sort of mirage, less palpable even than shifting air. They saw themselves in the land of Egypt again, forgetting all that was hateful in their experience. They saw themselves sitting by the flesh-pots, where they did eat bread to the full. They saw themselves drawing pitchers of water from the wells and the rivers, no stint of water, water brimming over upon the fat earth, the very beasts wallowing in water, their sleek hides glistening. They saw themselves sheltering under palm-trees that were not a puff of smoke; and then, the day's work done, they withdrew into the secret darkness of homes that stayed in one place, which they did not need to transport at the sound of the trumpet from one desert to another desert.

So it was that there, in the wilderness of Sin, the children of Israel murmured against Moses, and Moses himself was sad at heart. Never for one moment had his faith wavered in the Lord Whose servant he was, but it was not so with his faith in the Lord's people. What wonders had not the Lord done on their behalf? He had chastened the Egyptians with plagues and let the Israelites forth out of Egypt with a strong hand. He had thrust the waters seaward that the people might walk upon the bed of waters as on the dry land. And still the murmuring went up from among them, and the songs they sang of the palm-trees and the rivers were too melancholy to be borne.

For indeed things were hard for them. He was too gentle and kind a creature to be unaware how they limped and hungered and thirsted in this atrocious desert. And he went to them with his brother Aaron, and asked them somewhat piteously: "What are *we*?" What avail was it if they mur-

mured against two mortals? Only if they called on the Lord and believed in Him, hope was there. And the host shuffled with their feet, and looked on the ground sullenly, and said no word.

So Moses went away from them, to that tent which had gone with them from the beginning, the Tent of Meeting, where, it was felt, the sanction of the Lord most rested, and where, it may be, the brazier burned by day and night, making a bridge with Him of cloud and fire. And there he communed with the Lord, or, as some might say to-day, with his own genius, with all he remembered and knew and divined. And after long hours his face was suffused with a hope, and then with a splendid certainty, and he called Aaron to him, and demanded that Aaron should bring the people before the Tent of Meeting, which was at the head of the line of march, with all the wilderness stretching southward before it. And it was midday, with the sun in the south of the heavens, and the cloud of smoke from the brazier rising breathless into the sun, and it seemed to them all the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud. And Moses announced the imminence of miracle, that in the evening they should eat flesh, and the morning be filled with bread. And it was so. And it came to pass at evening, that the quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning, when the dew had gone, a small round thing lay on the wilderness, manna its name was, the bread which the Lord had given them to eat. And the people ate. And for a time murmured no more.

The apparitions of quails and manna at certain times and places in the host's journey have a bearing on the difficult question of the route of the Exodus, which has been little dwelt on; unless, of course, it is taken to be entirely a question of miracle, in which case the inquiry is valueless, for miracles can occur as well in one time and place as in any other. But if the general admission of many pious Biblical scholars is accepted—namely, that the two portents are rooted in natural

fact—we have made a definite advance in the direction of fixing the route for one important stage between the incontrovertible western and eastern limits of Red Sea and Jordan.

The statement that a cloud of quails came up and covered the camp, once in the earlier part of the year, once (as recorded in Numbers) in the later part of the year, would not of itself be very helpful. For quails migrate in vast numbers between the eastern and southern Mediterranean countries as far north and west as the South of France. A few even get so far as England. But the further statement that in the vicinity of the landing of the quails the host gathered quantities of manna, helps us to a precision which should edge out of consideration some of the theorizings regarding the route of the Exodus.

In the first place the quails are likely to have come down in some region by the sea, for they would avoid the high mountains which in most of that region are the swift alternative of sea-level. If therefore, in the vicinity of some sea-bordered plain, we find a region where some such substance as the Biblical manna has always been found, and is found to this day, we go a long way towards identifying the locale of this stage of the journey, all the more if no other region in our area satisfies the conditions so well. And it happens that these conditions are, in fact, satisfied exactly, in the region of Sinai to which this narrative has now attained; namely, the plain of El Markha, traditionally identified with the wilderness of Sin, and the network of wadis connecting that plain with Mount Sinai.

Now, it must have happened a thousand times, before Moses and since, that a flock of quails migrating either way has come to rest on the plain of El Markha. The birds fly with the wind, as Numbers asserts later. As they tire they fly nearer and nearer to the ground—at about the height of two cubits (or one yard), as the same chronicler records—until at length they come down on the ground so thickly that nets are not needed to catch them; they can be caught by

hand easily. They are the more certain to come down if the wind stops. Their tails are only rudimentary and they cannot change direction in the hope of finding a wind elsewhere. Their flesh is rich, and they must be eaten quickly, when caught, especially in the desert. On the hot stones of Markha under the hot sun, it would be easy to do with them as we are told the Egyptians did, and as we learn from Numbers the host did, on their second appearance. "They spread them all abroad for themselves round about the camp," or as we should say to-day, they cured them.

The appearance of quails, then, involves nothing necessarily miraculous. It may have been the Lord's hand, it may have been supreme good fortune that the birds came when they were sorely needed. It is not impossible that Moses, wise in the ways of this country, in the coming of birds and in the winds that brought them, had a sense that they were due. Is it possible that Moses knew also that in the tangled wadis westward from El Markha, often after a rainy season—and there had this year been great storms over the Red Sea—a small round thing was found under the trees in the morning, a thing like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it like wafers made with honey? Had Jethro told him of it, or one of the wandering shepherds, when he, too, was a shepherd? Had they even eaten of it, spreading it like honey on unleavened bread, as the Beduin in Sinai still do, in the season when manna is to be found?

It is not without significance that in the narrative the quails come first, manna follows. The quails came down by the sea in the evening, and the host spread them out in the morning, and devoured them, and went further on their journey. The place of their next encampment was Rephidim, but before they pitched their tents there, they had had the experience of manna, somewhere in the intervening valleys, which to-day bear the names of Wadi Sidre, Wadi Mokattein, Wadi Feiran, and Wadi Sheikh.

"*Manhu?*" What is it? What is this manna? as the

children of Israel, when they saw it, said to one another. Or, rather, what may it have been?

An author even so early as Josephus reports that, so far from disappearing from the face of the earth when the host came to the borders of Canaan, as the Bible states, manna was still to be found throughout the region where it had been first manifested. We must wait till the fifteenth century, however, before we get an account of the substance at first hand. The pilgrim, Breidenbach, reports that manna is to be found in all the valleys round Mount Sinai. It falls like a dew before dawn, and hangs in drops on twigs and grass-blades and stones. It is as sweet as honey, and sticks to the teeth. The Arabs and the convent-monks collect it and sell it to travellers.

Now, whatever the relationship of this substance may be to the manna of the Old Testament, this cannot be doubted. Old Breidenbach's manna is the same stuff as the Arabs in Sinai have called *mann* for no-one knows how many centuries. It is the same stuff as that which began to attract the fascinated attention of European scholars in the early part of the nineteenth century, when a certain Seetzen drew attention to it after so long a lapse of time. It is the stuff whose real nature, after a century-old misunderstanding, has only just been established, appropriately enough in Jerusalem, by Dr. Bodenheimer of the Hebrew University.

Breidenbach reports manna, then, in 1483. A century later we learn it is on sale in the bazaars of Cairo. (A certain Mr. Rossi was selling a substance he described as "manna" four and a half centuries later, in April 1937, in the South Shields Market Place. The South Shields Police Court, after consultation with the South Shields Food and Drug Inspector, felt itself so accurately informed of the true nature of manna that it imposed on Mr. Rossi a fine of two pounds "for selling the compound, which was not of the nature, substance, or quality demanded by the purchaser.") A certain Morrison in 1704 declares himself convinced that the

manna he has lately eaten on his journey to Sinai was identical with the manna of Moses, the God of Israel having decided to renew His miracle for all time. Niebuhr, writing in the year 1772, informs us that various species of manna are to be found in several Near Eastern countries, but conscientiously admits he did not have the opportunity to verify the existence of manna in Sinai. He was accompanied, however, by a zoologist named Forskal, who died on the journey, and whose observations were posthumously edited by Niebuhr. Forskal carries the inquiry an important stage further. He states that the stuff is the exudation from a tree, caused by the puncture of a cicada. But, at the turn of the century, the traveller Seetzen, already referred to, goes considerably further. He establishes the fact that manna has an essential relation with a type of tamarisk, called *Tamarix gallica*. The naturalist, Ehrenburg, establishes that it is a slightly more specialized tamarisk which is involved, which he calls after his own name, *Tamarix mannifera Ehrenburg*.

The description by Burckhardt of the stuff itself is neither corrected nor improved upon by subsequent writers.

“ In the month of June it drops from the thorns of the tamarisk upon the fallen twigs, leaves and thorns, which always cover the ground beneath that tree in its natural state; the manna is collected before sunrise, when it is coagulated, but it dissolves as soon as the sun shines upon it. The Arabs clear away the leaves, dirt, etc., which adhere to it, boil it, strain it through a coarse piece of cloth, and put it into leathern skins; in this way they preserve it till the following year, and use it as they do honey, to pour over their unleavened bread, or to dip their bread into. I could not learn that they ever make it into cakes or loaves. The manna is found only in years when copious rains have fallen; sometimes it is not produced at all.”

But the actual provenance of the substance remains quite vague. It is not quite decided whether it is a purely vegetable

substance, a natural exudation from the tree, or whether an insect has something to do with it by puncturing the tree and thus introducing some animal irritation which produces a morbid exudation.

It was in that state of vagueness that my friends and I found ourselves in the region between the desert of Sin and the encampment at Rephidim, where the Lord's manna first fell on Israel and the manna-bearing tamarisks at this day exude their gouts of manna in years when there has been rain. Here those valleys wind where, according to the travellers, those tamarisks are most abundant. If we had nourished some secret hope that in the manna country we might hear some word, however oblique, however trifling, which would throw a thin ray of light on the problem, the hope was soon burned out under that brazen sun, confined within those oven-walls of granite and porphyry. There were far too few English and Arabic words in common between the three soldiers and ourselves to serve as a bridge between us and the few Beduin we encountered, with their strange, their wild and timid, their almost animal eyes. It was not till we reached the small monastery-garden in the Wadi Feiran that a pool of word-counters was assembled by which our thoughts could be interchanged, still very crudely. While we were lunching there, a monk from the main convent on Mount Sinai arrived. He had been sent down by the *oikonomos*, the bursar, to talk over the stuff they were growing down in the Feiran gardens. He had two of the convent Beduin with him, to carry back some sacks of vegetables.

The resident monk and his novice had their modern Greek. The visiting monk had also some words of Italian. It seemed to me there was some chance of finding out something about manna, before we left the manna country, so I turned the conversation in that direction. Would I be able to pick up manna in the Convent? How were the supplies? The Italian speaker regretted that the Beduin had found no manna for several years in Sinai, for there had not been rain enough;



MONK IN HIS GARDEN

there would be none for us to taste, alas. Where does this manna come from? I asked. Was it true the Beduin found it only under certain trees and not under others? The monk pointed to Heaven. "*Iddio!* " he said. "It is from the Lord!" He believed quite simply that the manna the Beduin gathered during certain seasons was just as miraculous as the manna the Israelites had gathered of old time. I asked him would he do us the kindness of finding out what his Beduin might tell us on the matter, and prevailed on him with only the greatest difficulty. In the first place, he did not think it good for the morale of the Beduin that they should be allowed to talk freely with strangers. They had been slaves to the Convent for fourteen hundred years; it would not do to let them get above themselves now. He may have disapproved of the inquiry the more as to him manna was essentially a matter of Christian grace, and he did not like Muslims, and slave Muslims, to handle God's bread. But I had become a little desperate by now. I still insisted, making play with my credentials from the Archbishop, which were as heavily sealed as a State treaty, and at length he yielded. He turned to the Beduin and addressed a sentence or two to them in which I made out the one word "*mann.*" "*Mann!*" they repeated, "*Mann!*" and nodded vigorously. There seemed to be something they could tell us. They talked rapidly, somewhat tonelessly, each helping the other along. I looked inquiringly towards the monk, and saw his face darken with displeasure. The Beduin at last stopped, and looked from the monk to me and back again.

"What have they to say?" I asked him. I felt it unlikely they would give a complete report.

"*Niente!*" he replied. "Nothing at all!" He refused to say a word.

The benign Mustapha helped me out, as might have been expected. He perceived how intensely disappointed I was, and suddenly snapped out into the air with his huge fist. He opened it again, and a fly was crushed in his palm.

"An insect!" I cried, turning to the others. "The Beduin say it is an insect, after all!"

"Yes," Lucas pointed out. "But we knew that already!"

"We're finding out for ourselves," I said, a little hurt. "That's something!" I leaned over to the bough of a fig-tree and endeavoured to puncture it with my teeth. "Like this?" I asked.

"*La!*" said the Beduin. "No!"

"*La!*" said Mustapha and Hassan and Mohammed. "No!"

"No?" I asked. "How, then?"

"They mean that insects haven't got teeth!" said Lucas.

I then tried with a hand and an arched finger to imitate the action of the proboscis swooping down on to the bough.

"*La! la! la!*" There was a chorus of no's. They seemed to understand what I was driving at.

"No?" I asked. "How, then?" I insisted.

The insistence seemed to cause a little embarrassment. Mustapha opened his mouth to say something, and then once again the monk gave tongue. He was not only angry, but, somehow, the whole inquiry seemed to hurt him, too. His voice became almost as shrill as a woman's. Mustapha shut up completely. The one thing he could not bring himself to do was to cause pain to anyone. With Mustapha silent, I realized there was nothing to be said or done. I took up the matter later with Mustapha on the way to the Convent, for though there was not enough language between us to get the thing said, we often got where we wanted with dumb-show. But Mustapha preferred not to have anything to do with it. He put on his blandest face. He simply had not understood.

I attempted to take up the matter once again, actually in the Convent. But the incident in Feiran had been reported, and we were edged away from the subject each time we broached it. It was no use taking it up on our own with the Beduin, for we were helpless without the monks to interpret for us, and the Beduin would not have spoken, even if we could

have understood them. They are in a state of complete subservience to the monks, on whom they depend in a specially literal way for their daily bread, and it is quite likely they still believe, as they have believed for a good many centuries, that, in association with Moses, or St. Catherine, the monks command and withhold the rain from heaven at their pleasure.

We left first the Convent of Sinai, then the peninsula of Sinai, puzzled and unhappy. It was not till we reached Transjordan that a British soldier—I have spoken of him already—who accompanied us for a few hours over the uplands north of Kerak, informed us casually that manna is the excretion of some insect or other that feeds on some tree or other in the wadis of Sinai.

“What’s that?” I exclaimed explosively. It was as if a beam of light had suddenly been directed on to that dark episode in Sinai, the garrulous incomprehensible Beduin, the reluctance of the monk, his sudden flare of temper. I was conscious, as I spoke, of a sense of gratification that the mystery had been illumined, and, at the same time, of a profound disappointment and humiliation. In that same instant I recalled the Talmud’s dim pæans. The especial value of manna lay in that to each it had the taste he most desired, according to his condition. To children it tasted even as milk, to youths like bread, to old people like honey, to the sick like barley prepared in oil and honey. Before it came down, a north wind arose and as with a broom swept the floor of the desert clean, and after the wind a dew fell, which was frozen into a table of glass, as it were, on which the heavenly repast was served.

The excretion of some insect or other that feeds on some tree or other in the wadis of Sinai!

“What’s that you’re saying?”

But his attention was beyond my reach. At that moment he espied a young bustard walking leisurely over the desert, about a hundred yards away. He uttered one word in Arabic

—the Arabic for bustard, I suppose—and slewed the wheel of the car round between his chauffeur's hands, as if it would be too late if he translated the order into words. In the excitement that followed it was not easy to get him to talk about manna, though he was readier to open out on quails. When we got him round to manna again, he said we would find out all about it from a fellow who knew all about it, in Jerusalem, when we got there, in the University. He did not know his name.

It was thus in a cool house in Rehabieh, a suburb of Jerusalem, we continued the inquiry peremptorily cut short by the Greek monk in the Wadi Feiran, in the manna country. He has published a book on the results of his researches, which may not be as well known as so well-documented a book ought to be, because the mind opposes to it an inertia of resistance. Whether this is true or not, his careful documentation is supported by a number of photographs which establish his conclusions beyond argument. He has observed and photographed the *Trabutina mannipara* in the act of actually excreting the manna-substance, in beads that vary between pinhead-size and the size of peas. Where there were no insects, he found there was no manna. He discovered later that another insect of the same group, the *Najococcus serpentinus minor*, also ejected the stuff. On their issue, the beads of manna were as transparent as glass and of the consistency of hard syrup. In a few days they crystallized and became in colour anything between milk-white and yellow-brown. The beads were usually found on the small twigs and leaves, whence they would fall to the ground sooner or later, if the ants had not carried them off by then. The ants were avid for it, to the point of attacking the living insect and tearing it open to get at the sweet booty. The spider-nets woven between bough and bough sometimes glistened with pin-points of manna as with drops of dew.

There can be no doubt that Dr. Bodenheimer has expounded the true genesis of historic manna, Breidenbach's

manna, the manna that was sold in the bazaars of Cairo in the sixteenth century, the manna the Beduin to-day assemble in the wadis of Sinai under the tamarisk-trees in the years when there has been rain.

“I wonder,” I asked Dr. Bodenheimer, “I wonder if you managed to bring back any manna with you from your excursions?”

For a moment he seemed to be hesitating in his mind as to whether he had heard the question or had not heard it. Then, with a slight sigh, he decided he had heard it. He went over to a cupboard in the coolest corner of the room and brought out with extreme care a minute phial. The scientist handled it with all the reverence of a priest.

“‘And Moses said unto Aaron,’” I quoted, “‘Take a pot, and put an omerful of manna therein, and lay it up before the Lord.’”

He looked up and smiled. He held up the phial where I could see it better, then replaced it tenderly in the hollow of his palm. It was full of a brownish-yellow stuff, rendered down into small crystals.

“Would you like some?”

I turned away, so that he might not see the gluttony in my eyes. He bade me reach my hand out to him; then, having removed the cork, he allowed two or three crystals of manna to fall into my palm. I lifted them to my mouth, and closed my eyes, that I might the better savour them. It was sweet, honey-sweet, but I thought I detected in it the faintest flavour of liquorice. The taste and even the texture seemed identical with the stuff they sold in sweet-shops when I was a boy, under the name of sugar-candy. Perhaps they sell it still. They used to give it us when we had a cough coming.

“Thank you!” I said, opening my eyes, shutting out at one and the same time the toffee-shop at the street-corner and the wadis of Sinai.

“If you could not get it in Sinai,” he said, “I am glad you found it in Canaan.”

From the consistency of that sample of manna I tasted in Jerusalem, it did not seem to me wholly impossible, if that substance had any relation with the mosaic manna, that it should be ground down and beaten into cakes, as the host of Israel did with it. I heard that same day one more interpretation of the nature of manna, on the lips of a doughty traveller in those parts. He was convinced that the manna of the Israelites was made out of locusts, which would settle round them in swarms from time to time during their wanderings. If other supplies happened to be good, they would have nothing to do with the things. They would be a plague, as they had been in Egypt. But when supplies were low, they were anything but a plague. They were a boon from heaven. They picked up huge handfuls and roasted them and ground them and made cakes of the flour, as it is described in the Book. As the people in Sinai still do with locusts in times of sore need, he said, and as they do in South Africa too, Lucas supplemented.

I listened politely, but I was aware of a queer anger that had flared up inside me. It was irrational, but that, perhaps, was the point of it. It was irrational and anti-rational. Manna an excretion of insects! Manna a grinding into cakes of roasted locusts. If there had been stones about and windows about, I would have thrown stones at those windows.

My lips curled, as I listened, though I hope it was not noticed. "Don't you see what poor courage it is," I was saying under my breath, "to tell yourselves you're doing anything more than playing a game? I know how difficult it is *not* to—we all do it—but admit it's a game, that's all I ask. What do your rationalizations do more than explain the mere shell of miracle, and rather foolishly, as a rule? Don't they always neglect the essence? Isn't the point about the burning bush that burned with fire that it *was* fire, not the appearance of fire? Otherwise it wasn't notable that the bush wasn't consumed. Don't the rationalizations of all miracles miss the point? It seems to me you can't have your

cake and eat it. Which is it to be? Plain statement of fact or the esoteric symbols of sublime poetry?"

"The locust-cakes would keep for weeks," our friend was pointing out. "They could stow them away quite easily in their pack-saddles."

§ 2

A huge and solitary acacia stands at the entrance of the Wadi Sidre, as it were a sign that beyond those mountains extend the wadis where the manna in its season lies, small as the hoar-frost on the ground. The hills are low at first and then grow steeper and more tumultuous, extending over a range and quality of colours it is disheartening to seek to write down, the rose red of that sandstone, the dragon green of that granite, the serpentine layers of interposed black diorite. The sand in the wadi is now pink, now yellow, as if it were the potpourri of a whole province of pink and yellow roses. Nothing grew along those other-worldly wastes, than, now and again, the indomitable acacia, not by any means enough, yet, for the manna fallen from it to have fed a multitude. I felt it possible that the tree once grew here in considerably greater numbers, an idea which was strengthened by the spectacle of a camel with its jaws thrust into the midst of an acacia, munching away shamelessly, and against all report, for it is said that the acacia only exists at all because even the camel cannot stomach it. It is, of course, possible that that camel had not had anything to eat for so unconscionably long a time, that he had to see what he could extract out of an acacia, as a man who has gone hungry long enough will at last turn his attention to his boots. I was glad he had not persevered till beyond the next angle of the wadi, for there, under the lee of a colossal bright-red cliff, fed by some secret trickle of water, grew a three-foot high wild flower, its stalk and leaves startlingly green, its large bell-shaped flowers purple and yellow, like a giant nightshade.

It was the first wild flower we had seen in Sinai, and we dismounted, and looked at it in silence for some minutes, then walked a few feet this way and that, and looked at it again. Then we moved on, afraid lest, if we lingered, the camel would come up behind us, and we would draw his attention to the green and purple and yellow mouthful.

Between the wilderness of Sin and the encampment at Rephidim, the priestly scribes of Numbers, in their resumption of the Exodus narrative, interpose two stations, Dophkah and Alush, of which Exodus makes no mention. Now, concerning Alush it can be said at once that no successful attempt to identify it with any place-name, past or present, has been made, by even the most abstruse logagonists. With Diphkah, however, they have managed to get somewhere.

Deep in the heart of the mountains due east from Abu Zenima, and north-eastward from us here on the fringes of El Markha, the ancient Egyptians had opened up a valuable turquoise and copper mining region referred to in the hieroglyphs as Mafkah. It is not quite true they had opened it up. It remained, and remains, very inaccessible, but they had located it, and worked it, with great profit. The difficulties of access and working did not trouble the official Egyptian mind, which had little more respect for its human servants than for ants in an ant-hill, and felt the supply almost as inexhaustible. Mafkah, says Ebers, preceded by the feminine article "ta," is pronounced Tmafka. Drop out the nasal "m" in the word, in accordance with a process well known in the development of language, you get Tafka—that is to say, Dophkah. In other words, the Israelites, when they left Elim in order to make their way to Sinai, side-tracked towards Mafkah. The etymology is more plausible than the psychology. Whatever difficulties Pharaoh may have had on his Libyan border, it is unlikely that the valuable mines would have been left undefended. There was in fact a fortress there, at Serabit el Kadim. (The word "Kadem"

is probably the same word as we met earlier, Khetam, Etham, the fortress on the eastern frontier.) Why Moses should lead the host off towards the one region in Sinai where they were certain to come up against an Egyptian garrison is beyond imagination. At all events they probably had all the turquoise they wanted with them, if they had not thrown it away by now. They had had the opportunity to load up with turquoise in Egypt.

There was, on the contrary, a strong reason why Moses should *not* want to go to Mafka. In Mafka, at the place just spoken of, Serabit El Kadim, stood a colossal Egyptian temple, the remains of which are still extant. But the site it was built on was the site of an even earlier holy place (or "abomination," as the Hebrew prophets usually phrased it). It had been the principal shrine of Sinai from before the time of records, the altar of the Semitic moon-goddess, an earlier Ashtaroth. The suggestion has even been made that because the word "Sinai" itself may be a compound of "Sin," which means moon, the Holy Mountain itself is to be identified with Serabit el Kadim. (It should be stated that the word "Sinai" has also been derived from "seneh," which means acacia.)

Here again the etymology is more plausible than the psychology. To Moses, Serabit el Kadim was a double abomination, where round the Semitic harlot the Egyptians had ranged the hideous beast-gods from whom the Lord had but lately delivered him. If all the waters of the four rivers had watered Serabit el Kadim, and all the trees of Eden had shaded it, that is the one road in all Sinai that Moses would not have taken.

It is, of course, true that Moses was on his way to a holy place; and it will be remembered that he had asked Pharaoh to let the host go and sacrifice at a place three days' journey in the wilderness. But there is no indication that the shrine he was making for was the one he had in mind when he made his request. On the contrary, knowing in advance that Pharaoh would not let him go, it is probable he had had no

special place in mind. Certainly it cannot have been Serabit el Kadēm, not merely because that cannot be described as three days' journey in the wilderness, but because it was another sort of divinity than the moon-idol that was driving him. The Jehovah that appeared to Israel in this early stage of Israel's history still bears strong marks of a tribal origin, but the qualities that distinguish God from gods are already His most important aspects. He is intangible, invisible excepting to some-one especially chosen, and then only in a moment of supreme revelation. He is neither moon nor sun, or rather both moon and sun, and all the stars.

Moses was on his way, then, to a holy place, but it was not the moon's place. It was to a place never defiled by elaborate idolatries, to a temple which was a mountain not built by hands, a temple already sanctified to Moses by the Lord's appearance in a Burning Tree, a place so majestic that so long as there had been men at all in these regions, it had seemed the natural dwelling-place of divinity.

Along the Wadi Sidre, then, the host continued till it came to the Wadi Mokatteb, which, some nine or ten kilometres later, curves downward to join the broad Wadi Feiran, the high road to Mount Sinai. The hills that line the Wadi Mokatteb are of a soft red sandstone to which the spring storms have been able to do more violence than to the granite and greenstone formations of the neighbouring valleys. The bases of these hills along the greater part of the wadi are lined with a series of rocks that rain and time have sent crashing down from the upper levels. These rocks are more regular in shape than are usually found in such tormented country, their size varying between that of large packing-cases and small houses. They are also smoother.

Now, this valley is called Mokatteb, the Written Upon, because of certain words and drawings which are written upon, or rather scratched upon, the blackboard-like surfaces of these fallen rocks. We were aware of this, and almost

immediately after we entered the wadi, we stopped the cars and walked over to the rocks, where we found the writings without difficulty. It may be the fact that the writings were, in fact, there, that put the idea into my head. But I had the strongest conviction that if I had been faced by circumstances to dawdle in that valley for a day or two, I would have found it entirely impossible to resist the temptation of picking up a stone from the wadi-bed and scratching a name or a design in those hypnotic surfaces, though normally I am the sort of traveller who strongly condemns the habit of recording a visit in such documents as the walls of caves or the trunks of trees. I resisted it then, on the way through Mokatteb to Mount Sinai, largely because we were so busy identifying beasts and symbols along the walls and in the indented bays of that colossal gallery. But it happened that on another journey down that wadi, Lucas and I were immured in the valley for two or three hours for a reason I need not go into. It was a chance of utter solitude such as rarely comes. Lucas and I walked away from each other in opposite directions along the breathless valley, and some hours later met again. It was a political slogan chalked up on a long wall in Marseilles that brought the confession spontaneously to both our lips. The long, hot hours of Mokatteb and the mute challenge of the earlier wayfarers had been too much for us. We had each lifted our stone from the valley-bed, we had each climbed a difficult rock and in an invisible place, so that scholarship in later years need not be confounded and wisdom darkened, we had each left in the rock a sign that we had passed that way. For whose eyes? Not our own, for we shall not pass that way again, I think. For other travellers? Clearly not, for, in that case, we would not have been so furtive about it. I think I know.

It was because Zailu, son of Wailu, son of Bitasu, who had come this way with his father's camels, two centuries before the Christian era, had, writing in the Nabataean script, bade us remember him; it was because Chalios, the son of Zaidu,

had, in the Greek script, requested us to be mindful of him—and we wished them both to know that we did as they asked. Their ghosts would have no trouble in scampering up the rocks after us, to read our replies to their messages.

What, then, are these writings in the written-upon valley? And in those other valleys throughout Sinai, where similar inscriptions have been found (though nowhere in such large numbers)? There are drawings, there are signs, there are isolated words, or groups of words. The drawings are of animals chiefly, camels, horses, gazelles, ibexes. There are human figures, too, sometimes on foot, sometimes mounted on horses, or camels. Here, in Mokatteb, I noticed a creature which might be either a bat or a butterfly. I noticed, startlingly, a boat. I found the drawings very attractive, not merely because of their canvas and setting, but also because they often have a certain vigour and sense of line such as we applaud in gifted children. The signs include the Christian cross, the Greek alpha and omega, and one or two Egyptian hieroglyphs. The languages of the inscriptions do not explain themselves readily to the eye, for the people who made them were provincial from the backward region of their various worlds, and illiterate provincials at that. There is a variety of early Arabic or Kufic writing which would have meant nothing to the earliest western pilgrims, of whom the first to notice these inscriptions was a pious lady who visited Sinai in the fifth century. There is some writing, generally with a cross attached, easy to recognize as Greek, as early Christian therefore, inscriptions made by the early hermits and the first pilgrims to the Holy Mountain. But the greater part of the inscriptions are more baffling. At first sight they seem to be Hebrew, but it is seen on closer examination they are not. Yet some of the characters are very similar to Hebrew characters. Is it some kindred Semitic language? those earliest travellers asked themselves. Is it perhaps some early form of the Hebrew language itself?

And so a traveller in the sixth century, a certain Cosmas Indicopleustes, makes the breathless discovery that when the Israelites had received the Law from God in writing and had learned letters for the first time, God made use of the desert as a quiet school and permitted them for forty years to carve out letters on stone. "And the Israelites continually practised it, and filled a great multitude of stones with writing, so that all those places are full of Hebrew inscriptions, which, as I think, have been preserved for the sake of unbelievers." They took to it with the more alacrity as the art of writing had been a monopoly of the priests over in Egypt, and even the priests knew no more than the childish art of hieroglyphic, or writing in pictures. Moses himself had been as much a master of the art as any. But the Egyptian script was not merely childish, it was impious, being put together out of the images of idols. It was no strange thing that for the Two Stones and the Five Books the Lord must create a new medium, and Moses expound it.

Nothing was heard of these inscriptions between the ninth and seventeenth centuries, but when they were rediscovered, the ideas of old Cosmas were still widely entertained by both pilgrims and scholars. Difficulties began to present themselves when it was found that inscriptions similar to these, or identical with them, were found in regions far from the area of the Israelitic wanderings, as far away as the country before Damascus and Palmyra. But we have to wait for the Ordnance Survey of 1870 before it is established that the language is Aramaic, as written by the Nabatæans, the Arabian people whose headquarters were the astounding city of Petra, in a region which forms part of the country now called Transjordania. It was further established that the Nabatæan inscriptions are for the most part pagan, going back a century or two before Jesus. They were the work of the camel-men, who led their herds into these wadis, either to graze them there, or to carry merchandise to the coast. Time hung heavily on their hands. They looked round upon

the fallen rocks, on their smooth virgin surfaces. Without quite knowing what they did, they stooped to pick up a stone, they were over at the face of the rock, they were making words or drawings. A variety of impulses inspired them. In some there was the vague urge to make shapes for their own sake, which, when it is more urgent, is the seed of Art. The impulse of others was more utilitarian. They wanted other herdsmen to know that this was their wadi, their stretch of the wadi, and people who came after had better look out. Some were feeling lost and far and lonely, as well you might, between those hills, in that silence. It seemed to them they would never get back again to their lovely cosy caves away home in Petra, with the lamps in the wall, and the cool cruses of water in the hollowed-out rock-cupboards. So they bade their friends remember them or sent a greeting. "Greeting Uwaisu, son of Fasujyu, good luck!"

And they had names not so outlandish as these, being a Semitic people. Jacob desired that he might be remembered, so did Moses, *Musa*. A thousand years earlier another Moses had passed along that wadi, shepherding a people. Two thousand years later another *Musa* went this way, leading a herd of camels as *Musa* the Nabatean had, when he came down from Petra. Ghost called to ghost from hill to hill, and ghost called back again.

§ 3

The Wadi Mokattein debouches south-eastward into the Wadi Feiran, richer in every sort of interest than any other valley in the peninsula. Where it is desert, there is none more deserted, where it is oasis, there is none richer. Nowhere is there such variety of colour, of desert fauna and flora. At one point sullen ravines close in upon it, at another it is as broad as the bed of an estuary. Along this wadi was built in the first centuries of our era the only inland town that has ever existed in Sinai, the town of Pharan, the

ruins of which are still visible, and, though not in the usual sense of the word, "important," more strangely evocative than many grandiose heaps of stone lumber twenty times their size. Due south of Pharan, the wadi is overshadowed by a mountain which, in its shape and separateness and visibility, is the most beautiful in the island. That is Mount Serbal. It is so beautiful a mountain, that travellers coming inland from the west and seeing it for the first time could not dispossess their minds of the idea that they were gazing on the veritable Mountain of the Law. It was an idea that long survived the later identification of the Mountain of the Law with Gebel Musa, and was still maintained in comparatively recent times by several imposing authorities.

Serbal is beautiful. But when the traveller continues along the wadi (or its eastern extension, which bears the name of es Sheikh) to where it is blocked at its extremity by the complex of Gebel Musa, he entertains no argument. Though Gebel Musa is far from being in bulk among the major mountain masses, he recognizes that it is extreme both in the majesty of its physical appearance and a certain moral ambience. There is no other theatre exalted enough for the theophany.

Such, then, is the Wadi Feiran, into which the host now swung out of Mokattein on its way to Rephidim, where, as it is written: "There was no water for the people to drink . . . wherefore the people strove with Moses . . . and Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, what shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me."

The quails had been eaten long ago, manna had not failed, but what use was even bread without water to wash it down? So the Lord commanded Moses to strike upon a certain rock there, and when he had done so, water came out of the rock and the people drank.

But the mood of Moses was not as it had been before, when last he was the agent of miracles and manna and quails had been provided. Then his heart had been with them, for they

were faint with hunger. The wilderness of Sin had taken its toll of them. "What fault is it of ours," he had asked sadly, "my brother's and mine, that you murmur against us?"

It was not so here at Rephidim. He had asked them to be patient, but they murmured the more. He told them that but a day or two's march away was a great stream of waters, that which is to-day called the oasis of Feiran. He told them this, though he may have intended to go round to the Holy Mountain by some other route, for he could not hope to adventure down the richest valley in the land without at last drawing some enemy down upon him from the hills. He told them of Feiran, but their sole answer was to pick up stones from about their feet and threaten to stone him. Their petulance was become more marked. They felt they had only to stamp their feet, like children, and they would "prove" the Lord, test him, and force another miracle.

Yes, like children. They were untried, the hardships of the way were heavy on them. So Moses addressed himself to the Lord, and struck a rock with his rod, and there was water for them. But his anger still smouldered. And he called the place Meribah, because they had striven with him there; and called it also Massah, which means a proving, because they sought to prove the Lord, to see if he would vouchsafe miracles when they asked for them.

At a fold in the Wadi Feiran under a cliff on its north side, a huge square rock which many ages ago came hurtling from the mountain above it, is pointed out by the Beduin as the rock which Moses struck. Nowhere is Feiran more oven-dry. It is not impossible to believe that, at a spot like this, the host, tortured by thirst, suddenly turned on their leader, even to the point of threatening him with stones, of which there is no lack.

At this day when the Beduin pass by this rock, they never neglect to throw stones on to one or other of the two great cairns which they have piled up during these many centuries,



IN THE HOLLOW OF SINAI

cairns which would have been much larger, I do not doubt, if the floods did not regularly diminish them. Two camel-men duly added their stones during the time we lingered in the shadow of the rock, and we felt constrained to do likewise, Jim and Lucas and I. Whereon Mustapha and the two askaris came staggering up to us with a huge boulder each, thinking we ought to do that sort of thing more handsomely than the mere Beduin, if we did it at all. At that, I set out to convey to them that this was the very rock which the Nebi Musa had struck in order to obtain water, a story they had some dim remembrance of; whereon they felt themselves also constrained to try to find out whether the rock contained any of its ancient potency. They looked round and found some dry branches of acacia, but had no success with them. So they brought over their rifles, which still seemed magic rods to them, despite their years of service, and struck the rock with the butt-ends. Again the rock was obdurate.

“*Mafisch moyya!* No more water!” complained Hassan, and turned disgustedly away.

It is reported that the Beduin throw stones idly on these cairns as they pass by, because just as idly the Israelites threw stones into the water, after it had gushed out of the rock. But it is as easy to believe that in this instance the grimmer earlier mood is thus commemorated. The fact, however, is, that in all these regions the Beduin and the more settled Arab alike throw stones or pile them up whenever they come to a holy place, quite irrespective whether it has, or has not, a Muslim association. So, later, on this same day, a sheikh of the oasis of Feiran as he passed threw a stone on to a heap piled up within the ruin of an early church. Perhaps it is he feels, somehow, that he is helping to perpetuate the sanctity of the place, even though it be an infidel sanctity, and he may come to some profit thereby in Allah’s good time. Or perhaps the impulse is tied up with that act in the complex ceremonial associated with the great *haj*, when the pilgrim, calling on Allah’s name, pelts with seven stones a cairn in

the Wadi Mina near Mecca. He tells himself, and the sheikhs will tell him, that he is casting out devils. But it is certain the stone-throwing goes back further than Mohammed, to a time when he called on the name of other gods than Allah. So that, in the remote essence of the act, he is not casting out devils but adoring them; and we, that day in Wadi Feiran, and later, in diverse other places, were witnesses of acts of idolatry that had preceded Mohammed in these places, and doubtless preceded Moses, too.

The explainers have been less busy with the miracle of the rock and the water than with the other manifestations. It is, of course, suggested that essentially the feat was one of water-divining. Throughout the story of Moses, the implement most frequently referred to in his equipment for miracle-working was the rod. He was, in fact, primarily a water-diviner, which, in the desert, is to have the gift of working the most important of all miracles.

There is some plausibility in that. Moses may well have been a water-diviner, as lesser men have been. But an anecdote recounted by the late Governor of Sinai is more stirring. He tells how the Sinai Camel Corps halted in a wadi, and proceeded to dig down into some loose gravel for water. But the work was not going swiftly enough for one of the sergeants, who seized a shovel, and dug away with more vigour than the others. Whereupon, suddenly, the polished hard face of the weathered limestone cracked and through the porous rock gushed a stream of cold water. "Behold!" the askaris cried, "behold! Nebi Musa strikes upon the rock!"

An old resident gave me an episode from his personal experience which might throw some light on the matter, he thought. He was once attracted, by the suspicious behaviour of a bird, to a rock wedged into a narrow cleft in a hill-side. Thinking to find the bird's nest, he scrambled up the cleft and looked behind the rock. There he noticed a minute trickle of water which immediately disappeared into the

gravel in which the rock was wedged. Passing that way again with some of his men, he asked them to get their picks and prise the rock away. As soon as this was done, the gush of water that had been hidden came out in a thin, clear stream.

I expressed my gratitude for the idea but was not certain the host carried picks with them. The Talmudic legend states that neither the water, nor the sieve-like rock from which it sprang, abandoned the host any more, except, perhaps, for a respite at Kadesh, and that it went with them in all their forty years' wandering, up hill and down dale; wherever the host halted, the stone and the well halted, too, and the water shot up as high as pillars and descended and flowed again in streams that were navigable, and on these streams the host sailed to the ends of the world and brought back with them unto the wilderness all the world's treasures.

But those world-wandering streams have shrunk now. Little remains of them in the Wadi Feiran, though the waters there are still more abundant than elsewhere in the peninsula. And the stone has returned to its place.

§ 4

In the earlier stages of the journey, Moses had turned southward from Etham in order to avoid meeting the Philistines, "lest peradventure the people repent when they see war." It is possible that he had a similar reason for going as far southwards as El Markha, before turning eastward towards the Holy Mountain. He knew he could not traverse the peninsula without sooner or later coming up against one or more of the half-settled tribes who lived in holes carved out in these mountains and pastured their flocks here; but he was anxious that the test should be delayed till the thews of the host were hardened with strong sun and tough marching.

It could now be delayed little longer, he concluded. He was marching upon the chief wealth in trees and water of the whole land. The bordering hills of the great valley were seamed by countless lesser glens. By this glen or the next

glen the enemy were creeping down upon him, the wicked Amalekites, as a white-faced spy had told him. Or they were climbing on hands and knees up the further slope of some hill to lie in wait there just below the summit, to roll down rocks or hurl their javelins at the moment the host came within range. Was that a line of heads on the skyline, or merely the toothed weathering of the rock? A sudden frightened bird came squawking up. A sudden rock came crashing down. Beware! Amalek has thrown the first javelin!

For, as it is written, then came Amalek and fought with Israel in Rephidim. They were a collateral people with Israel, being descended from Esau, and for that reason the hatred between them seems to have been especially violent. Their headquarters were in the desert region called the Negeb, in the south of Palestine, as the headquarters of Midian were in the east, beyond Akaba. But a sub-tribe of the Amalekites, too, as of the Midianites, was settled in Sinai—on the great plateau of Et Tih, northward from these valleys. And now news came to them that this tribe descended from Jacob, who had mishandled their ancestor Esau so scurvily in the matter of their inheritance, had come to do the same trick on them again, having made off with the wealth of Egypt. They had come stealing into their land by the unpeopled deserts and the back valleys, and were now making for the great water-and-tree place in the broad valley, where they themselves were wont to bring their flocks after all the other pasturages were burned up. So they came out of their holes and fell upon Israel. It was the first of these angry attacks by the tribes in possession, upon these inscrutable wanderers. There were many more to come, and like most of them, the Amalekite attack was, in the end, broken and wasted. They fought hard and well, but it was as if they fought with swords of reed. Somehow it seemed as if Israel had invisible helpers on their side.

If the traditional site of the battlefield is to be accepted, the Amalekites allowed the host to penetrate the valley as far as the oasis itself, and only then came out from their ambush, as Moses later bids the host remember: "and they smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint or weary." Although to be sure, the sight of the oasis should have cheered them considerably. The tradition points to a pyramid-shaped mass, by name Gebel Tahuneh, the Hill of the Windmill, as the mountain where Moses stood holding up his hands, while Joshua, whom we here read of for the first time, engaged the Amalekites in the valley below. And his brother Aaron, and Hur, the husband of Miriam, went up with Moses. And while Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed, and when the hands of Moses drooped, Israel drooped, which would seem, indeed, to be a perfect metaphor for the fortune of all this journey. And after a time, the hands of Moses were so heavy, he could hold them up no longer, so the two with him placed a stone under him, and held up his hands on either side. The stone is shown at this day among the ruins of the chapel on the summit of Gebel Tahuneh. And so at length the forces of Amalek were wasted utterly; and the legend declares that, even as in Joshua's later battle, the sun was delayed on his going down, that the work might be completed before night came. And so here in Sinai, the prologue was played to that great drama of conquest which surged northward, four decades later, along the uplands of Edom and Moab. But in between a more notable conquest was to be achieved, on the summit of the Holy Mountain, a more permanent conquest, not won by swords and javelins, over a subtler enemy.

Beyond the rock of the striking the wadi becomes narrow and menacing, winding about between sun and shade. It was a grateful thing to come upon the first timid hints that water was not far off, with a green whisper of grass and the bunching together of a few sprigs of broom, as if they found

comfort in company. A partridge scampered off round a rock. A pigeon swooped towards us and wheeled round up the valley again. A rather drunken butterfly heeled over and dithered off. The palms thickened eastward along the valley. We were at the beginning of the Feiran oasis—it is rather a chain of oases, which at this point bear the name of El Khessueh. Some hundred yards away from between two pillars of shadow, a smaller white pillar moved, and came slowly towards us. It was the sheikh of the place. He seemed to be gliding rather than walking. Then, in succession, he took our hands, and placed each against his eyes and lips and heart. He did it all in absolute silence, as if he were dumb. He was with us for some hours. We did not hear him say more than five words. He had matt black eyes like two pieces of ancient pottery, and a thin beard on the point of his chin. It looked as if each of the hairs had its own problem to find sustenance in that greaseless flesh. We followed him through a tangle of palm into the enclosed oasis-garden. There were two deep wells and a *shaduf* beside one, more primitive than anything we had seen in Egypt. Beside the *shaduf*, shaded over with palms and almost enclosed in a thicket of shrub, was some sort of a half-sunken building. Only the doorway was accessible. There was no door, only a panel of blackness. I now made out that, tangled up in all that greenery, were several more such buildings. I thought I could also see the curved dome of a mosque.

I pointed to the sunken house. “He sleeps here?” my gesture asked Mustapha.

Mustapha pointed between the palm-trunks to a goat-hair bivouac some little distance away. He seemed somewhat surprised I could infer such a thing. “There!” His answering gesture implied that it would be just as stifling for such a person as this to sleep in his coffin as to sleep within walls.

I went up to the doorway and became aware that over the doorposts, or the place where doorposts might have been, was a huge squared block of stone. I stared at it incredulously. Where had this wraith-like sheikh learned the art of squaring stone so expertly, where had those thin sticks of arms drawn the strength to lift it into place? Or if not this sheikh, how had his father done these things, one generation, or five generations, ago? I stepped, puzzled, over the threshold. The roof was as it well might be in an oasis. It was made out of the trunks of palms crossed with laths of reed. But the walls were not. Why walls at all? A few rays of light struck through the roofing. I could make out now how the walls were made. There was a mortar of sun-dried mud and rocky pebble, filling up the interstices between boulders and squared slabs of stone, several slabs in each wall. They belonged to the same world and came from the same place as the block over the lintel. Then I saw two faint transverse groovings in one of the stones, where the light fell. I passed my fingers along them. It was a cross, of course. I now realized where those blocks came from. They came from the ruin of some Christian church in the hermit city of Pharan, several miles up the wadi. With groaning and sweating, some less rachitic Beduin, more enterprising than the generations that came before and went after him, hoisted them on to the back of his camels and brought them down from Pharan to El Khessueh to make a storehouse for his wheat and dates. Some fifty or five hundred years later, more were brought, to make more storehouses, and the small mosque beyond the trees. There was no lack of squared stones in Pharan.

All else here but those stones was timeless, the well, the *shaduf* to draw water from it, the goat-hair tent, whatever kneading-trough and grinding-stones might be under it to make bread. The host of Israel passing this way would have been familiar with all those things, having used them either during their sojourn in Egypt, or on their wanderings since. A nomad tribe passing this way two thousand years from now

will find nothing alien here, excepting those squared slabs of stone.

They did not belong here. When they stood in their place, sixteen hundred years ago, the hermits that had come to live out their lives in fasting and prayer under the shadow of the Holy Mountain, said their orisons against those stones. They were gaunt creatures, those hermits, with staring eyes, their cheek-bones almost cracking their dried skins. They must have been easy prey for the later children of Amalek when they came free-booting down the wadis from Et Tih. And when, some centuries later, the Ishmaelites came up out of Arabia, with a cry that had never been heard before, worse befell those fragile ones. The sword of Mohammed flashed, the blood of Jesus spurted upon the walls.

I thrust my way out of the dark storehouse into the oasis-garden. "Let's get out into the wadi!" I said. "Back into the sun again!"

We moved from El Khessueh under the riven slopes of Serbal, along a length of wadi where the profusion of colours attained the extravagance of nightmare. At a slight distance from El Khessueh, the sepulchres begin, black gashes in the rock where the bones of dead anchorites were deposited by living anchorites almost as dead as they. They begin with only one or two sepulchres hacked out in the rock-face, then there will be as many as five or six, six rungs in a forlorn ladder of bones. Sometimes an isolated rock is handled thus, or a mortuary rock built up from level ground. The narrow lateral valleys are scored with these sepulchres, chiefly the darkest and narrowest of them, the Wadi Aleyut, which thrusts through the base of Serbal south-westward towards Tor. It is said that in some of the least accessible sepulchres the skeletons of the anchorites still survive, their arms stretched along their sides, fragments of their winding-sheets under the bones.

At last the mountain-walls withdraw again, the green reasserts itself, there is a sight of water, a little metallic in the

taut air. The line of palms, which seems at first to straggle and fail, builds up again, masses into groups and companies. We are in the oasis of Feiran, the "smiling" oasis of Feiran. (It is not said of any oasis that it does not "smile.")

But for me, having approached the oasis between those eye-sockets of sepulchres, that was not the mood of the place, a mood not lightened by the hills that encompass it, each bony with the unwithering ruin of Pharan, each hollowed into a hundred chambers, where the anchorites might live lives hardly more spacious than their deaths in the sepulchres.

There will have been tents in the oasis as long as there were trees and water there, or as long as the art of weaving was known. But the oasis is already spoken of as a town in the second century, and the only townsmen that can have been accommodated in that town, doomed from the first to anguish, and to an ecstasy not less searing than anguish, can have been the hermits, who, even so soon, had found their way into this remote valley to live in holes in the rock, or to shape it into minute habitations with the semblance at once of a church and a house and a sepulchre. It can only have been to live under the shadow of the Holy Mountain that those wild-eyed citizens first came here, forsaking the world—so early was the tradition established that here Moses came, here the heat of the Burning Bush scorched his cheeks.

There is no trace in stone or document that there were Hebrews amongst them, though Moses was the greatest of their prophets. Despite the example of Elijah the Tishbite, and the later austerities of the Essenes, the hermit way was not then, and has not been since, a way of living among the Hebrews, excepting most rarely. More hermits came, and monks came, too, who did not impose on themselves so harsh a regime of solitude. A female saint, making a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain in the fourth century, finds the rock-faces and the hill-tops swarming with anchorites and monks. The anchorites were usually complete solitaries, though some shared their cells with a younger disciple. They only came

up out of their solitude to take communion together on Sunday mornings. The monks were a little more gregarious. They made small convents for themselves, and convent-churches. But where monks assemble there will be theological debate, monk with monk, or convent with convent. A new sort of murmuring arose amid this later host. It was necessary to keep it within the bounds of orthodoxy. Pharan became the seat of a bishopric before the turn of the century.

Other men named Moses flare fitfully across the chronicles. There was an Abba Moses of this town who exorcised demons and cured a certain sheikh, Obedianus by name. This sheikh, therefore, led many of his kinsfolk to Christ. There was also a Bishop Moses here, who had been an Ishmaelite, a Saracen. It is told that, after his conversion, he went to Alexandria to be ordained, but would not submit to the ordination of the Aryan bishop, Lucius, whom he found there. After his consecration by another hand, he returned to Pharan, and like his namesake, the Hebrew, performed miracles in the desert. After his death, he was included in the company of Roman saints.

The controversies that engaged these later men named Moses, were subtler than those that raged round the first Moses when he pitched his tents in this valley; and in the dust of them, it is not likely that they saw the first Moses often or clearly, though they had come to this region because he had sanctified it. The hermits in their private cells did not continue long in their private hells and heavens, nor the churchmen in council their subtle debates on Theotoky or the Co-equality of the Three Persons. During the conquest of Egypt and Syria by the Caliph Omar in the seventh century, the town was destroyed. An effort seems to have been made to galvanize it into life again during the rule of the Latin kings of Jerusalem, but it was unavailing. The debaters had transferred their debates to Rome and Byzantium, but the flame of the ecstacies of those old hermits had been long extinguished. They belonged to a method of faith alien to

Hebraic or Ishmaelic Sinai. They could not be kindled again.

Some of the habitations carved out by the anchorites had a sort of vestibule, with an inner chamber deeper in the rock. It was felt those had room enough both for an *abbas*, a hermit-father, and his disciple. (Some of these inner chambers now have a door fixed to them and serve as store-rooms for the wheat or dates of the Beduin in the oasis.) But there were more austere hermitages, with only the small vestibule carved out of the rock, so low that the hermit could not stand upright in it. Sometimes he had carved out a bench for himself where he would sit with his back arched against the curve of the rock, staring straight before him. If some-one remembered to put water and food in front of his cell, he might eat or drink. Otherwise he would not.

The three of us had separated, each had gone wandering off to his own hill. I stood for some minutes staring into one of these one-celled hermitages, trying to body forth in my imagination the aspect of its ancient tenant. I stood there so long I could almost persuade myself a pair of intense black eyes were staring back at me, straight through my head into the blue sky behind. I stepped over the threshold and sat down on the rock-bench the cell contained, more because that glint of disembodied eyes distressed me, than because I hoped, sitting where he sat and gazing where he gazed, to feel myself for a moment inside his skull. As I sat, the curve of the cell arched my back and brought my head forward from the neck. I was only conscious, for fifteen minutes or more, of great discomfort. I thought the vertebræ would crack. Those earlier ones sat here not only from day to day, but from month to month, and year to year. Surely, quite soon, the discomfort went. Did they go into a country, I speculated, on the further side of feeling as on the further side of a mirror? In other words, some of them went mad, did they not, as we would describe it? And did those who felt madness coming,

and desired to escape it, remembering that Christ Himself had had friends and disciples, was it they who came down from their cells and lived in convents, first small, and then larger, until at last a convent like that of Justinian might be built, over in the place of the Burning Bush, as famous as any in the world?

But there was also a third sort of hermit, I hazarded; the sort that would not go with his brothers, preferring to keep his soul to himself. For he knew how to keep his soul to himself. He knew how not to go mad. And these, who must have been few, were these not of the number of the saints, who penetrate into regions of the spirit we have no inkling of, and there attain strange potencies and there work miracles, as the chronicles tell?

So I sat in the old hermit's cell with my head thrust forward from my neck, and a fly settled on my hand, and I was aware there was no sensation in it. And at the same time I became aware, too, that the ache in my neck and spine was numbed. How long would it take, I asked myself, vaguely alarmed, before all feeling went out of my limbs—days, or weeks, how long? And at last I would sit staring straight before me, my hands on my thighs, and when some-one put food or water before me I might eat or drink; if they did not, I would not. The host of Israel would have moved on long ago, myself not in their wake. I would never reach Mount Sinai. I would never go home to England again, to read Fielding, and to see to the lawn, and get the books straight, and visit that island off the Northumberland coast.

And then a huge kind face, a sensible face, came sailing like a moon round the edge of the rock into my small patch of sky. And a voice asked, not too convinced, the voice of Mustapha asked:

“ *Quais, Mistu Goddun?* ”

There was still feeling, I found, in three or four fingers. I extended them towards him.

“ Give me a hand, Mustapha! ” I croaked.

He leaned across the threshold and pulled me towards him and straightened me out.

“Tea in garden!” he said gently.

Here in the oasis of Feiran is a small annexe, as it were, of the great Convent under Gebel Musa. It is in the charge of an old monk and a novice, who, with the aid of a handful of the Convent Beduin, succeed in growing here a number of fruits and vegetables which the soil and air of Gebel Musa are too austere to nourish, or can nourish with much less success.

Jim and Lucas were already there when I arrived, sitting at a table in the garden under a pergola of vines. The pergola extended all the way from the garden gate to a small white-washed house. It was supported by a number of pillars crudely put together out of drums and bases of columns that had once supported the roofs of the churches of Pharan. They were painted red and pink and blue and yellow, giving an air of gaiety, almost of carnival, to the place. The sunlight struck like swords between the vines, patterning the painted pillars with a sharp criss-cross of shade, less permanent but bolder than the crosses carved by the builders fifteen hundred years ago. The whole place was warm with the leafage of vines and olives and figs, bananas and dates and lemons. Onions and beans and cabbages rioted in a welter of water, which a slender Beduin child with gazelle-like eyes irrigated by flattening the tiny mud-banks with a mattock and letting the water course through. A bird-cage and a cow-bell hung from the crossed laths. Pigeons cooed on the flat roof. A white-and-brown puppy gambolled about and bit our shoes. And by the table the monk and the novice stood, filling our small glasses with tea again and again.

There were two rooms in the small house, as there had been two cells in the rock-hewn hermitage. Here were monk and novice, as there had been abbas and disciple. It was almost as if they had escaped from the mountain to come into com-

munion with other humans, though God would still remain their chief passion. And instead of waiting for the dates and water of charity, they would grow their own wheat and bake their own bread. They both looked very happy, and not very clean, but water was not so prodigal that one could afford to wash with it. The monk had been there a good many years, the novice but one or two. He was about twenty, with not a hair on his chin, and his long hair tied in a bun on his neck. He said he came from the Island of Zante, and when I told him I had been there, his face lit up and his eyes filled with tears. He will have to live his way through a good many moods of homesickness before the word Zante no more quickens his heart-beats, but they will become less acute as the years go on, and Zante at last will mean no more to him than stone or table.

While the men unashed the stores from the car and brought them over and prepared some luncheon for us, the young man from Zante took us round the house and garden with all the pride of a landowner showing off a grand estate he has just acquired. In his wake followed the white-clad, thin-faced, scanty-bearded sheikh, whom we had first met in El Khessueh. He had come on with us here to Feiran, but we had still heard him utter no more than five words. Over the lintel of the house was painted the legend: Mone Sinai 1898. Within, each room had a bed, draped over with a gashed mosquito-net which could only have served to imprison any mosquito that came round and goad him to fury. There were a few coloured eikon prints on the wall, stuck on with rusty pins, and two or three holy books on the table. The novice's room had a trunk of American fibre, as if there was a vague idea he still might some day make a journey somewhere. There were two guns slung on the monk's wall. They could not have shot anything, but they were a sign palpable of the seignorial rights conferred on the brethren of the Bush by the Emperor Justinian fifteen hundred years ago. Out in the garden a dozen descendants of those Beduin serfs who had accompanied

the granting of seignorial rights, were thinning vegetables and chopping wood and letting water flow in channels. Another stood under a thick palm, stirring a huge cauldron of savoury vegetable stew, peas and lentils and greens and onions, all simmering in a thick yellow sauce. Out of the depths of the tree pigeons cooed and cooed, as if their throats were leather. The Beduin lifted a crust of the stew with his wooden spoon, and breathed on it to cool it, and reached it to me so that I might taste. It was a good stew.

At this moment the white-clad sheikh came up close to me and stood there, as if there were something he wished to say. I looked inquiringly into his eyes and found at last he wished to bid farewell.

“Good-bye,” I said, “good-bye,” and reached out a hand cordially. Stiffly and shyly he reached out his own. As he did so, I noticed again he was wearing a ring, a fine turquoise set in a soft alloy of silver. I felt that having known him for some hours, it would not be discourteous to look at the ring now, to study it. The turquoise perhaps came from those same mines of Serabit el Kadim which the Egyptians were working north and west from here, while Moses and his host were moving eastward from Feiran. Perhaps it might even have been a stone in the necklace of the dancing-girl of the Pharaoh Seneferu, who was sailing over the waters of a deep lake in that fair girl’s company; and the girl leaned over the side of the ship, and, alas, the turquoise necklace that the king had given her slipped from her neck into the water; whereat he consoled her, saying he would dig for her in the mines of Sinai a necklace one hundred times costlier; but she mourned greatly, she would have no other necklace than that one which had fallen into the water; so the king called his magician and he uttered magic words, and then removed the water, layer by layer, piling the layers up on the bank of the lake, till at last the necklace was revealed, and was raised again, and was restored to the white throat of the king’s dancing-girl.

"How beautiful!" I said, studying the sheikh's ring in the oasis of Feiran.

The next moment the ring was in the palm of my hand.

I blushed fiercely. I had not admired the ring in order that it should be given me. My mind, filled with other thoughts, had let slip the fact that if you admire the property of a Beduin, he will hand it over to you, however little may be left to him. I was certain that silent and melancholy sheikh had little in the world but that ring. Despite the custom, and though the ring attracted me greatly, I was not going to let the man impoverish himself. I looked round unhappily and saw Mohammed coming over to us, to summon us to lunch. Mohammed was the darkest askari, the slim one, with a gold tooth.

"Mohammed!" I implored him. I showed him the ring, the sheikh, I shook my head, I put my hands together as one asking forgiveness. The ring was restored, without excess of pain, I hoped, to the sheikh. He turned and slid away and I started after him, feeling I might at least let him have a silk handkerchief or a revolving pencil to remember us by. But at this moment I noticed an odd erection at the farther end of the vineyard, a shady shack of straw lifted high on six palm-branches. It was a watcher's tower, I realized suddenly, such as we read of in Isaiah and Matthew: "There was a certain householder which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower."

"*And built a tower,*" I cried out to the others.

"Lunch!" Mohammed informed us. The sun glittered on the gold tooth.

"The sheikh——" I started. But the ghost-sheikh was gone.

We returned to the outer vineyard, and sat down to lunch, using for chairs the red sandstone drums of ancient pillars. It was a pleasant luncheon. We were well content. And then it was that the monk appeared, with his two Beduin, having come down from the convent to arrange about vege-



INTERLUDE

tables to be planted down in Feiran and vegetables to be taken away to Gebel Musa.

"As it might be Jethro," I murmured, "coming up out of Midian."

"Yes," Lucas approved. "It was here Jethro came, with a wallet of manna slung over his shoulder."

"Manna," breathed Jim. "Ask him about manna."

I asked him, but, as I have recorded, with incomplete success.

§ 5

It is at this point in the Biblical narrative—that is to say, between the defeat of the Amalekites and the arrival of the host at the Mount of God—that Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, appears for the first time since his disciple bade farewell to him in Midian and set out for Egypt. It has been suggested, however, that the episode is introduced prematurely, because a later text states clearly that Jethro conferred with Moses at the end of the host's sojourn in Horeb, not before it began.

But it would be more satisfactory to believe that Jethro visited Moses more than once during this period. He was immensely proud of him. The Hebrew had turned out wiser and nobler than he had dreamed, though his hopes of him had been high. He was back in Jethro's own country again, and had just scored a great victory over the Amalekites. It is natural to assume the old man would be anxious to congratulate him, and to offer him any help for the future that lay in his power. Perhaps, even, he felt that the affairs of Moses and the host he led were ripe for some tremendous climax. Mount Sinai loomed ahead of them. They would soon attain the very fringe of its shadow. He was an old man, a foreseer. Perhaps he had beheld a first faint flare of lightning in that region of the heavens and heard a first clap of thunder. At such a time, while there would be company enough, august and invisible, for Moses the Prophet, there

might be much comfort for Moses the man, in an old friend's hand and word.

Moreover he had a charge to hand over to Moses, Zipporah his wife, and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Moses had taken Zipporah and the elder boy to Egypt with him, but apparently had taken some opportunity to send them back to Jethro, along with a later-born son, for they would be safer in Midian. Now, the host had shown at Rephidim what they were capable of. Moses judged, and judged correctly, that the other tribes in Sinai would henceforth keep their distance. So he sent a messenger across the hills for his family, and Jethro came down with them, and Moses "did obeisance, and kissed him," for he greatly loved him. Then Moses bade a sheep be slain; and old Jethro and his wife and children were beside him again. And after a time, Zipporah took the children to her tent, and covered them with rugs, for they had fallen asleep. But Jethro and Moses talked for many hours, as of old, till dawn came. And that day, or the day after, Jethro went back to his own valleys again, for he had business with his people. But later he came again, perhaps more than once, when Moses and the host had been settled for some time in the plain under the Holy Mountain. During that time Moses had brought down from the Mountain two tables of stone, on which all godliness in man's relation with God and man might be built up. But, worn out with long vigil in the folds of the mountain, with Jethro Moses pursued less tremendous arguments. We learn that they discussed the administration of Law, the appointment of magistrates. What else they discussed, how long the discussion continued, is not recorded. We know only that after a certain time Moses let his father-in-law depart, and Jethro went his way into his own land.

Mohammed was driving us that day, for we had found that with Mohammed driving, Lucas and I could squeeze in together on the front seat. There was a good deal to see,

and being together helped us to see it. During the first part of the day, I had been on the outside, and had found it rather wearing. The wadi-beds had been extremely rough and at every bump the door at my side went flying open. We tried tying it with string to the machine-gun socket, but that made things awkward when we wanted to get out, and we wanted to get out frequently. Having nearly come down on my head a dozen times on the road to Feiran, I insisted Lucas should change places, and I got behind the gears. It was hotter inside there, but safer. Mohammed slammed the door hopefully and then went round to get up to his steering-wheel. The first thing I noticed when he lifted his hand to the wheel was the Beduin's turquoise ring on his second finger. It seemed to have been there for a few years. Mohammed apparently liked jewellery, whether on his finger or in his mouth.

“ My ring ! ” I muttered.

“ It looks better on him ! ” Lucas comforted me.

We thumped heavily along the wadi; it was the worst piece of going we had met so far. At one point, where a stream crossed the track, the men got out and built up a surface with boulders so that the cars could get over without breaking their axles. The attempt to help them with a boulder or two caused the usual embarrassment.

The oasis was rich and successful enough, but I still did not find it “ smiling.” That was the note of it, it was successful, against immense odds. It produced good wheat, and tobacco, and cucumbers, and beans, and especially good dates, which are pulped and stuffed in gazelle skins like sausages and sold as sweets in Cairo. The oasis was splendid, in fact, with a savage splendour. It lifted its palms like clenched fists towards the desert thrusting in from the east. It spread round itself arrogantly a cloak of lawn and moss. It wore a thicket of tall reeds like a head-dress of plumes. Birds gave its defiance a voice. On the left-hand side of the valley was a small mosque, where the faithful still repair. Further up the valley was the ruin of a church where the faithful have said

no prayers for fourteen hundred years. They were both poor things. The oasis took no stock of them, embroiled in its old war with the enemy. At length, in a lumpy no-man's-land of stunted vegetation and boulders cracked open by thrusting roots, desert and oasis came to grips. There was no use pretending any more. The desert had it. But no, that was not true yet. The expiring oasis shot a last volley of magnificent tamarisks. Then it turned over on its side and died. The oasis was dead, dead as the bleached camel on the track, lightly powdered over with the blown sand.

We were with Moses and the host again, and their memories. On the right-hand side of the wadi rises a small hill, crested with a ring of stones, where the Beduin, it is said, repair annually to propitiate the shade of the Nebi Musa with a rag or two or a handful of dates. The wadi becomes as sterile now as any of the wildernesses the host has passed through—not a trickle of water, not a blade of grass, nothing but the harsh scrub. It is as if the greenness and wateriness were a hundred leagues away, or further, that they were a dream, they were not there at all.

Yet the host marches with head uplifted, and their feet do not fail among the stone-hard torrent-ruts. They have defeated Amalek, though the issue was long in doubt. There are friends, north and east, the folk of Jethro the Midianite, who came himself to salute Moses, and to give him assurances regarding the tribesmen in these valleys. The Prophet himself seemed easier in his mind than he had been since the beginning of the journey. It was partly because of Zipporah and his two small sons; it was good to see the way his eye kindled when his gaze fell on them perched up on asses in the van of the companies. But it was not only that. It seemed as if now at last he could permit himself to believe no mishap would occur which could frustrate the great journey and the great reward. In a day, or in seven days, the lightning and the thunder would be about his eyes and ears. But now for a

little time, he permitted himself to be a man among the men of Israel, the father of two small sons perched up on asses.

So it went on for certain hours, till they came to the place where the valley ends in a narrow gateway, and the cliffs come so close together there is hardly room for more than three or four beasts to pass abreast. The mood changed. Feet slowed down, eyes became solemn and sombre. They were passing to a new dispensation, but they had not of their own grace earned it. The first company to attain the rock gateway halted, as if they were reluctant, as if they were afraid to go further. Then they went forward again. The high road to the Lord of Israel stretched straight before them.

This gateway is to-day called El Bueib; the wadi that extends from it in a vast ark towards the foot of Mount Sinai bears the name es Sheikh. It is possible to debouch from es Sheikh, some two or three kilometres distance from El Bueib, into the Wadi Solaf, and attain the Mountain by a quicker but more difficult route. The host would have found one or two sections of the journey as difficult for their beasts as they would have been for our cars. They doubtless took the longer route, as we did; it is possible some of the elders took the shorter route, as Sayce suggests, but it is not easy to see why they should leave the main company at this juncture.

After we left the narrow gate, we travelled along the Sheikh's wadi for some two hours, or it may be three. Our diminished cars tottered like beetles between his high hills. The journey had a curious timeless quality, its only episodes being a raven, a camel, a tamarisk, again a raven, a camel, a tamarisk. And then at last we reached the Sheikh's tomb.

Who was this Sheikh who, for the Beduin, invests all this broad wadi with his sanctity? His name is Saleh, and this was his tomb and his shrine. It is from this *Nebi Saleh* that one of the oldest tribes in the peninsula traces its descent.

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So it went on for certain hours, till they came to the place where the valley ends in a narrow gateway, and the cliffs come so close together there is hardly room for more than three or four beasts to pass abreast. The mood changed. Feet slowed down, eyes became solemn and sombre. They were passing to a new dispensation, but they had not of their own grace earned it. The first company to attain the rock gateway halted, as if they were reluctant, as if they were afraid to go further. Then they went forward again. The high road to the Lord of Israel stretched straight before them.

This gateway is to-day called El Bueib; the wadi that extends from it in a vast ark towards the foot of Mount Sinai bears the name es Sheikh. It is possible to debouch from es Sheikh, some two or three kilometres distance from El Bueib, into the Wadi Solaf, and attain the Mountain by a quicker but more difficult route. The host would have found one or two sections of the journey as difficult for their beasts as they would have been for our cars. They doubtless took the longer route, as we did; it is possible some of the elders took the shorter route, as Sayce suggests, but it is not easy to see why they should leave the main company at this juncture.

After we left the narrow gate, we travelled along the Sheikh's wadi for some two hours, or it may be three. Our diminished cars tottered like beetles between his high hills. The journey had a curious timeless quality, its only episodes being a raven, a camel, a tamarisk, again a raven, a camel, a tamarisk. And then at last we reached the Sheikh's tomb.

Who was this Sheikh who, for the Beduin, invests all this broad wadi with his sanctity? His name is Saleh, and this was his tomb and his shrine. It is from this *Nebi Saleh* that one of the oldest tribes in the peninsula traces its descent.

He is doubtless that Saleh who in Genesis is a mere name in the list of the progeny of Shem, but in the Koran attains lineaments and character. There was a Saleh whom Allah sent to proclaim the faith of Islam before the advent of Mohammed, before even the time of Abraham, and not long after the Flood. His mission was to the people of Themud, in Arabia, and the sign he showed them was the Naga, or the she-Camel of God, which he fashioned out of the living rock. "Let her go and feed in God's earth," he bade them, "lest a speedy punishment overtake you." But they hamstrung her, and a violent tempest overtook the wicked, and they were found in the morning prostrate in their dwellings. The sign of the hoof of the she-Camel, who was in Sinai at some time before evil befell her in Arabia, is to be seen at this day impressed in the rock below the summit of Gebel Musa, though some hold it is the sign not of Saleh's camel, but of Mohammed's. The Muslim tradition goes on to say that Saleh fled to Sinai and ended his days there as a hermit, and his tomb was built in a broad wadi that is therefore called es Sheikh. In later days, he was as much unmoored out of his time as out of his place, and the unlettered maintained, as they still do in Sinai, that he was at once one of Mohammed's precursors and one of Mohammed's intimate circle, alongside of Moses, David, Jesus, Omar and Ali. And it came about at length that he became chief of all the holy ones venerated by the Muslims of Sinai, and each year the tribesmen assemble from all over the peninsula to do him honour.

Yet what, after all, is this *Nebi Saleh* doing in this wadi, so little distance from the Holy Mountain? Would he have migrated from Arabia if the Mount Sinai region had not always been a shrine, long before the Hebrew-Christian-Mohammedan epoch, as far back as that neolithic time whose cromlechs and hive-shaped sepulchres close in towards it from the encompassing country, as the neolithic monuments in England close in on Avebury? Is it not probable that the progressive revelations expressed themselves here in characters

and imageries appropriate to each? Out of the Hebrews came Moses and his Law. Then the early Christians came, who had given their hearts to the Virgin of Nazareth, and though they established their chief shrine in the place of the Burning Bush, it did not attain its real glory until it gave house-room to a later virgin, St. Catherine of Alexandria, after whom they renamed it. Then Mohammed came and went, and the tribesmen built their Saleh out of elements dimly remembered from all. Saleh is something of Moses, something of Mohammed, something of some Christian hermit at some time or another. But he is also something older than these things, as Moses is older than Moses and St. Catherine than St. Catherine. He is the Holy Mountain itself, rendered into a tale they can understand and a personage they can revere.

And as for the shrines in the region of the Mountain, the Hebrews have built none there, partly because the ground has not been theirs to build on, partly because they were no great shrine-builders, and to build on the hills of Zion was enough for them. The Christians have built their Convent and house the bones of St. Catherine there, close beside the place of the Bush. And for Saleh the Muslims have built a lesser shrine. It stands on a low hill, a small octagonal building, put together out of whitewashed rough stone, and is set in a roughly traced compound containing many lesser graves, a chip of rock at head or foot. The roof slopes to a dome embellished by a spear and crescent. We found very little within; first, the niche, the *mihrab*, showing the direction of Mecca; then, a wooden cenotaph covered over with a faded green cloth, embroidered with some gold lettering, a sura from the Koran. On the cenotaph was the green banner of Mecca, folded, and, on the end near the *mihrab*, was a turban, a white linen cloth with a green sash folded round it. The green of the banner and the sash is the Prophet's green, Mecca-green, the green of those who have made the *haj*. It is also the green of the green robes of El Khidr, who will

appear to pious Muslims in distress if, having made the *haj*, they call out his name. For he has drunk of the fountain of life, where the green grass grows and the green trees, and will live for ever. El Khidr is his name, wherein the learned read the name of Jethro. We are not far, even in the tomb of Saleh, from Moses and the people of his tale.

Against the tomb was a sort of stone shed, where pilgrims might cook their meals and sleep. It contained a copper ewer and two large wooden bowls and a larger copper saucepan. In the middle of the floor was a small hearth of stones built up round a scooped hollow. In a corner were a pick and spade to dig graves. There were graves everywhere. It was all a grave. It was not easy to set against that cadaverous background the fierce junketings that go on there, during its one week in the year—the sacrifices of sheep and, in good years, of camels; the dancing round fires of tamarisk and acacia; the camel-races; the firings of volleys into the air, till the hills crack with the noise of them, and the camels answer again, roaring; the huge mounds of chopped mutton and snow-white rice, round which they gather at night and thrust their arms elbow-deep into the sizzling stew and cram their mouths with it, so full that the juice runs down their chins; and, at the end of it all, the pilgrimage up the slopes of Gebel Musa, to that place where the she-Camel of Saleh has left her imprint on the rock, to pour out in her honour libations of camel-milk.

It is not easy to conceive these things in that ashen-grey silence, though they leave there the whole year round the saucepan that seethes the flesh of the sacrifice and the bowls in which they collect the milk that is poured out.

To the host of Israel passing down this wadi, the hill of the Nebi Saleh seemed as desolate as it did to us. Even if there was a shrine there, those thousands of years ago, as there well may have been, and even if the host came on it in the time of merry-making, the revellers would have scattered, startled,

into their holes in the hills, at the rumour of this people coming up with fires and trumpets. And so for several hours the host continued between the steep walls of that valley, and it was not until they had come to nearly the end of it, that a great mountain would have come into sight, or rather the base and platform of a great mountain. The setting sun found only the high places, and these were like fire rather than stone. A movement went through the host, like a wind stirring a field of tall wheat. Faint and far, from the vanguard of the companies, the ram's horn uttered a sequence of notes that had not been heard on the march before.

What is the meaning of that proclamation? the murmur went. That is the base of the Holy Mountain we are looking on. An old man—he is from another tribe, I do not know his name—said: though we travel a thousand years and a thousand leagues, we shall not go further than that Mountain. It is the end of all journeys. What did he mean, the old man? He would say no more than that.

Where is the Prophet?

He is already gone from among us. He was seen one moment, and then he was not seen. It is as if a cloud came down and he went in it, and he is gone into the folds of the Mountain.

There is a great plain under the base of the Mountain. It is here, not many minutes' march away. There are trees, and there is water. The elders say we are to pitch our tents there, and we must hasten. It will be night soon.

The Wadi es Sheikh continues for some eight kilometres beyond Nebi Saleh, and then meets at right angles the plain of Er Rahah, commonly taken as the Desert of Sinai, the place of the Israelite encampment during the supernal events that followed now. Some time before the end of the wadi is reached, Ras Safsafah, the great north-western bastion of Mount Sinai, becomes visible. Where the wadi and plain meet, stands a low chalky hill not unlike the hill of the Nebi

Saleh, a hill likewise crowned with a small mosque. The name of it is Gebel Haroun, where, according to the tradition, the Prophet Aaron stood and looked down with dismay on the orgy of the Golden Calf. Is it ominous to come so soon upon the place where the swift backsliding is commemorated? It is better to keep the eyes fixed on Ras Safsafeh, standing at the head of the mountain and below it, like some colossal pulpit, with the plain at its feet vast enough to hold a listening multitude as vast as Numbers itself enumerates.

“Nebi Musa!” exclaimed Mohammed suddenly, after a silence which had lasted several hours. His right hand left the steering-wheel and he pointed straight across our faces to a far pinnacle of rock, tawny gold against a violet sky. I felt the skin at the back of my head contract. It was as if I, too, could not possibly have failed to see the Prophet where he wound his way up from the plain, if only my eyes had not been so enfeebled by books and city-smoke. And at this moment the car switched round left-handed, so that our vision was turned upon a narrow valley between two great walls of mountain. On the left were Gebel ed Deir and Gebel Moneidjeh, on the right the flank of Sinai. Between, about a mile away, the black points of a grove of cypresses spiked the red hills. Those cypresses are the first thing seen, the last thing seen, I am not sure if they are not the chief thing remembered, of the Convent of St. Catherine, more than the stout fortress-walls, the church-tower and the mosque-minaret so strangely coupled, the dull gold smouldering of the sublime mosaic. It is the cypress you see, not the thorny acacia, out of which the Tabernacle was fashioned. It is not the centre of the desert but the Mediterranean shore you have come upon. It is not the place of the Bush, but the place of the casket of St. Catherine’s bones.

I did not doubt, that moment my eyes first lit upon those cypresses, I would find the building itself as beautiful, as strange, as haunting, as anything I had ever seen. But I had an apprehension that I had somehow strayed from the track

of my journey in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver, here, on the very floor of the Mountain where his supreme revelation had come to him, and he had recorded it on two stone tables that perished long ago, yet remain as imperishable as the Mountain they were hewn from.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ I

FIRST you see the cypresses of the Convent of St. Catherine, as you first see the smoke of a steamer out at sea. Then, as you see the ship's hull, you see the stout walls. Then the mass begins to distribute itself, as you sway and clatter along the Wadi ed Deir. Then the stone walls of a large garden compound extend toward you, overtopped by a tangle of fruit-tree boughs and a silver flurry of olives. Beyond, embayed and buttressed, stand the fortress-walls of the Convent, their aspect and much of their substance very much as they were in the middle of the sixth century, when the architects of the Emperor Justinian set them up. There is some sort of a road along the left bank of the wadi, though one feels that no road at all might be smoother. Then you cross the wadi and climb more steeply. You are aware that the Convent hunches itself as much as it can against the further flank of the hill, so as to get out of the way of the winter torrents. Then you climb a steep hairpin bend. A few moments later you take the angle of the garden and drive across a half-enclosed space to a gate in the low wall connecting the two enclosures. Then you dismount, from car or camel, and feel in your pocket for your letter of safe-conduct from his Eminence, the Archbishop of the Convent of Sinai. You may find a Bedu, or perhaps one of the monks, waiting here to take it from you. They will have found out somehow, a long time ago, that you were on your way, while you were still invisible in the Wadi es Sheikh.

As for us, we had already seen a number of Beduin in the valley, more in those few moments than in the last few hours. They were convent Beduin, we took it, making off to their tents in the plain or the side-valleys. Nearer to the Convent

we passed about ten monks, or more, about half the monks there, we found out later (using the word loosely for priests and deacons and novices and lay brothers). I suppose it must have been some sort of a saint's day, when they allow themselves a respite from their work or prayer, or their reading in holy books. We never saw them take any leisure again, or not more than one or two at a time, and then briefly.

The cars drew up under the lee of the wall, I already had the letter in my hand, clutching it firmly, aware that without it, we would be compelled to camp out in the plain of Er Rahah, after all, as the host of Israel did; or as a party of distinguished visitors from Palestine did, several years ago, who, having made a strenuous trek across the desert, armed with a cordial letter from the Patriarch of Jerusalem, found themselves turned away from the Convent gates, on the ground that the Convent was in no way dependent upon the Jerusalem Patriarchate and had no connection with it.

We had been more punctilious and were more fortunate. A monk, a lay brother, issued from the gate and came towards us. He was small and plump and young, but heavily bearded. He had a simple face and a happy one, with none of the marks of theatrical piety, no pallor, no prominent cheek-bones, no rapt eyes, no bloodless lips. I went up to him and bade him good evening in his own language. His face became even happier than it had been. *Kali'spera*, he replied. Then I handed the letter over to him. From the Archbishop, I said, in Cairo. He took the letter gingerly, as if he were rather afraid of it, as he well might be, with all those seals. His hands were very dirty, too. He held the letter by a corner, and looked helplessly over his shoulder into the inner courtyard. Another monk came up, a little more worldly than the first, and took the envelope, then addressed me rapidly in Greek. But my ear was not yet re-attuned to the language, and I could make out very little of what he said. Then Jim said: "Turn round. There are the big ones."

Three old men of immense dignity were coming up towards

the gateway. We must have passed them, but I had somehow failed to see them. They were the big ones, we discovered at once; the Vicar, or Father Superior, who was the Archbishop's representative here in the Convent (the Archbishop resides permanently in Cairo), the Sacristan-Librarian, and the Oikonomos, the Bursar. Greetings were exchanged. Then I took the letter from the hands of the lay brother and handed it over to the Father Superior. I handed it over more breathlessly than he received it; for while it was the first time I had come on pilgrimage to the Convent of Mount Sinai, he, in a sense, had been receiving pilgrims for thirteen hundred years. He broke the seals and took out the note. His Archbishop had written it in Cairo in response to a letter written in the New Forest by the late Governor of Sinai. But we were a long way from the New Forest, or even from Cairo. The Father Superior thrust his spectacles back against his forehead and read the letter aloud, without excitement. The two flanking dignitaries nodded their heads politely, even pleasantly. In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver? How interesting! You ought to find a good deal here that should be of value to you. There is a well-known mosaic in the basilica, you must not neglect that.

I was tired, of course, too tired to remember the crowds that have sought admission at these gates across the centuries for reasons of piety or art or scholarship. But despite my fatigue, I think I was right in feeling that it was only by some accident these monks were in Mount Sinai, the Mountain of Moses, and not in Mount Athos, or in one of the monasteries in Meteora. Moses was not at the centre, but at the periphery, of their devotion . . . and how could it be any other way?

By this time another monk had arrived, probably one of the Beduin had summoned him. He had a lively face and warm eyes. "This is Porphyrios," said the Sacristan. "He will look after you." I thought it a beautiful name, very appro-

priate to his background of porphyry mountain. He smiled engagingly, and gestured to us to follow him, which we did, after a courtly exchange of good-nights with the three big ones. We crossed an inner courtyard, where a certain number of Beduin still stood about, busy with small loaves of bread, counting them out and distributing them and tying them up in bundles. The Convent was on our left hand, the garden on our right, beyond the courtyard. The tops of the trees came up above the low wall. We turned and passed through a low doorway in the thickness of the main fortress-wall. The door stood on its hinges, as thick as a wall itself and heavily strengthened with iron. Beyond the doorway was a dark vaulted passage covered by a small cannon several centuries old. Somehow, here, it did not look archaic, any more than the metre-and-a-half thickness of the walls did; it could still serve its purpose if called on, against such enemies as it had been provided for. There followed another passage and another door as stout as this one. Then we were at last in the precincts. There was a smell of water and wells and ground corn and animals in stables. It was very tortuous and confusing; now we were roofed over, now we were not, we looked up into an incredible lozengc of open sky. A piece of darkness detached itself and slid across the lozenge of sunlight at our feet. It was a cat. In an embrasure on the right hand were two points of green flame. That, too, was a cat. We turned and plunged into shadow and emerged into sunlight again. We were in a small courtyard. A bird-cage stood on a table in the sun. It contained a large white pigeon with a vivid red beak, and two smaller birds, a blue-gray dove and a speckled-brown partridge. The first was more or less reconciled to being where it was. It stood on its perch and looked out on the world with a sour eye. The two others had been more recently caught. They flew violently from side to side of the cage, hitting their wings each time. A novice stood gazing at the imprisoned birds, a little sadly, I thought. He, too, had been free not long ago.

We halted a moment, looking from the birds to the monk and back to the monk again.

"This one Cyrillos," Porphyrios explained. "He is from Chios." Cyrillos smiled wanly. "As for me, I am from Zante."

They are like a page from the Greek Anthology, I said to myself. "What are they for," I asked Cyrillos, "those birds?"

Cyrilos shook his head and was silent. It was Porphyrios who answered. "The sick ones will eat them," he said with pleasure, "when it is permitted to eat meat." It was only a vicarious pleasure, I thought; he did not look one of the sick ones.

We moved on, leaving Cyrillos darkling behind us. We turned left, we turned right. Was this the basilica on the right hand, with so humble a vestibule? And this was the mosque, was it not, the incredible mosque, steeple and minaret cheek by jowl century upon century? There was no synagogue here, by any chance?

It is a tangle, I told myself, in which it will be terribly easy to get lost. It will be easy for me to look at eikons and nothing else, for days and days; or to look at manuscripts in the library; or to find out what I can about the monks, or their slaves, the Beduin, the Gebelliye, how they live, what they feel. It is a labyrinth. I must hold the end of my thread most carefully between finger and thumb, or I will wander about, from day to day, week to week, as long as they will let me stay, bemused with themes which I dare not study now. I am in the steps of Moses the Lawgiver. I must not let the thread fall.

We seemed to detach ourselves quite suddenly from the tangle of dark passages. The black beard of Porphyrios was one flight up an external wooden stairway clamped with nails on a whitewashed wall. We followed it up three flights, leaving the top of the fortress-walls below us as we swung



THE BURNING BUSH

round and up into the last storey. There was a cat squatting sphinx-like on each landing, not a comfortable cat, but very knowledgeable and proprietary. They made you feel the place belonged not to the monks, not even to his Eminence the Archbishop; it belonged to them. They could turn you out the moment they felt like it. The black beard ahead of us twinkled reassuringly along a paved veranda running round two sides of the building. The wooden roof was supported by wooden posts painted blue and white. You were protected from falling down on to the roof of a lower building by a railing, similarly painted. Off the veranda opened a dining-room, then a kitchen, then perhaps half a dozen visitors' rooms.

“Here!” motioned Porphyrios, smiling. “*Kala?* Is it good?”

“Good!” we corroborated, each opening a door and taking possession of a room. We had no idea it was going to be so good. The walls were bright with a blue wash, and the ceiling tricked out in a painted pattern of cane. The beds looked hard, but they looked clean, each with its own gay coverlet. We had a table each, a basin and jug of water each, and a chair. We were doing well. Mustapha came along the veranda, hugging two or three kitbags to his bosom. Behind him loomed Hassan and Mohammed, with boxes of stores.

At this moment an old Bedu emerged from the kitchen. He wore a very tattered frock and the remnant of a British khaki coat. He had a bold nose and rather wicked, quite subservient eyes.

“Saleh!” Brother Porphyrios announced. “All of them Saleh!” he explained, smiling. He meant all the Gebelliyeh bear the name.

“Salaam, Saleh!” we said.

“Salaam!” he replied, and bowed, and took our hands, one after the other, and placed them to his lips. As he bowed, his corkscrew curls swung forward from above his ears.

"Strange!" I said.

"What's strange?" the others asked.

"They had corkscrew curls exactly like these, the old men, in the little synagogue in Doomington! There was one named Moisheh, or Moses; the Bent One, they called him. He came from Ekaterinoslav. He was very learned."

"We shall find the earlier Moses, too," Lucas assured me.

"Come!" Saleh said to the men, importantly. "This way!" It was fine to be able to issue an order to three such demigods, with lumps of leopard-skin in their piled turbans. The men laid the stores out on a table in the dining-room. Saleh got busy with plates and tumblers.

"*Quais*, Mistu Goddun?" asked Mustapha.

I went over to the railings and looked down on the check-work of flat and pointed roofs; then I looked up towards the church-tower and the mosque-minaret, pinky-brown and waxy white; then my eyes sailed over the thick bastions of the further battlements; then they took the huge flanks of ruby hills, until at last they attained the narrow river of sky.

"*Quais*, Mustapha!" I summarized.

It was cold, and we put on a couple of sweaters apiece, and leather coats. Then Porphyrios pointed towards the kitchen.

"Eat?" he asked.

Jim had thought there was never going to be food again.

"Mushroom soup?" he asked poignantly. The thought, we discovered, had been an *idée fixe* for some hours.

Saleh heated up our tins for us in a huge copper saucepan in his kitchen, over an open fire of tamarisk wood, while we spread ourselves out over a quite clean table-cloth in the dining-room. It was an attractive room, with long strips of black-and-white goat-hair rug on the floor, the walls painted bright blue, and a series of pictures on the walls—a Marriage Feast at Cana, a portrait of King Fuad, a late Russian eikon, their majesties King George and Queen Mary, the Angel Preventing Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac. Through the

window you looked straight down into the wadi and the black cypresses wrapping round themselves the veils of the advancing night.

Porphyrios let us drink from a bottle of the monks' ancestral liquor, the *arrak* they distil from dates. Travellers were already drinking *arrak* before the end of the seventeenth century. He followed this up with a sweet wine from Cyprus. As for food, we had not only mushroom soup, but peas, and new potatoes in tins, and bully beef, and the last of our cheddar cheese from Suez, and apricot jam spread on flat quoits of convent bread. Then we drank quantities of tea, then walked a few times along the veranda and on the roof opening out from the ramparts below. The stars looked so close, you could imagine some-one might let them down on silver chains before long, like lamps. The mountains were not porphyry now, but black basalt, ink-black. The cold was beginning to find its way like a wire-thin dentist's drill through the seams of the clothing. Bed, we thought. It is about time we went to bed. We put on most of our surplus clothes and slept well.

I slept well, in so much as I awoke fresh in the morning, though that may have been because of the extreme purity of the air; I know I remained conscious a good deal of the night, and on several layers of awareness. I think I heard the bell that summons the monks from their cells at two-thirty in the morning, first three notes, low-pitched, then louder, again three times, five minutes later. I heard them once, and then the second time, or perhaps I did not hear them. It was the thought waiting there behind my ear-drum that set them vibrating. I saw the monks throw off their single covering, and rise from their beds fully-clad, excepting for their elastic-sided boots. Rubbing their eyes and blowing on their hands, they converged from several corners into the alley that leads down to the basilica. Then they went to their places, bowing low to the altar as they passed it, the venerables nearer the

altar, and the priests and novices and lay brothers according to their seniority. And the intoning began, and the responses, and the litanies of saints, and continued long, hour upon hour. And there was a swinging of censers to and fro, to and fro, and always the bowing low to the altar, as the thurifer passed before it, north and south, south and north. And the lights glimmered low in the dark-blue and dark-red oil-containers of the gold-plated and silver-chased lamps.

And over on the plain of Er Rahah, there were no lamps or lights at all, excepting for the brazier that burned before the Tent of Meeting, with a single guardian tending it. The host slept in their goat-hair tents, stretching their limbs out on rugs which seemed much softer to-night than of late, because of the soft sand of the plain that was under them.

The brazier burned before the Tent of Meeting, where Moses would often meditate half the night, or all night long, while the host slept. But he was not there to-night. He was somewhere on the Mountain, under an over-arching rock, or in a narrow gully where no wind came. Somewhere near at hand a trickle of water dripped into a small basin edged with maidenhair. For several hours he sat in that place, in the darkness, his back arched against a stone, his chin supported in his hands. Then before dawn came, he rose, and went further up the Mountain.

§ 2

For the next two or three days I hardly moved outside the Convent precincts, excepting briefly. I realized that however long we stayed, there would be at the end of our time infinitely more left unseen than we had seen; as one would find after a week, or a year, at the Vatican, or the British Museum. As I have said, I imposed a discipline on myself, and the discipline was Moses.

I went out then into the Convent of Mount Sinai to seek the traces of the great Hebrew Lawgiver and, as I have intimated,

I found them few. Now, I have known the synagogue all my life, and in the nature of things, Moses has not seemed remote there. I have known the mosque for a good many years, both in the Arab cities and in the desert; and again, though further, Moses has not seemed remote. How would it be (I asked myself) if Moses came back on earth to-day and were taken into a synagogue or a mosque? I think he would feel at home quickly. He would remember the idol-cluttered temples of the Egyptians, which were the only buildings devoted to worship he had known, and look round with a feeling of vast relief on the austerity of these places in which the Israelites, or their kinsmen, the Ishmaelites, came to recite their prayers. He might even find the austerity a little excessive, for he would see nowhere a central shrine so ornate as the Tabernacle described by the priestly collators of the Book of Exodus, whether he himself actually had it constructed, as they report, during the months of waiting in Sinai, or (as is more probable) it is an anticipation of the shrine built centuries later, by the Priesthood he had created, in the Holy City of the land he had led them to.

Yes, he would feel at home very quickly in any synagogue or mosque at all, I decided; and in many churches of the Protestant faith. But how would it be if he entered a Greek Orthodox basilica, and specifically, the ancient Basilica of the Convent of Mount Sinai, on whose threshold I stood now? He would look round with bewilderment and, for some time, with dismay. He would be told that the faith which had built a shrine here was his fulfilment. But he would stand in the midst of the massed eikons and know that, in respect to one of his commandments, he had been annulled. He might turn the pages of the later Testament and read with a heavy heart the words regarding the Mount of the Theophany which St. Paul, one of its supreme doctors, had written: "Mount Sinai is the mount that might be touched"; it is "the mount that gendereth to bondage." In that old basilica of the monks, more slowly than in most others, would the awareness come to

him how deeply rooted this new faith was in his own old faith, despite the images and the bristling thickets of lamps.

So I crossed the dark threshold and entered the incense-fumy air of the basilica and wandered among the heavy pillars in the dim light of lamps and tapers. Under the apse, in the flanking chapels, I sought and found what images of Moses are to be found there. Moses is still beside me, I bade myself believe. This Greek monk who is conducting me is no Greek and no monk; he is Moses the Hebrew. What does he think of these images of himself? Three thousand years ago he would have removed them from their places, at least those which are hanging on nails, and would have broken them across his knee, as he did with two engraved tables of stone, though those were not images.

But now? Or let us say that it is fourteen, thirteen hundred years ago, in the first years after the foundation of the basilica. It is still, and will be for some centuries, the basilica of the Burning Bush. These monks, though they do not hold the faith he has consigned to Israel, the faith which Israel still observes in its tragic dispersal—these monks have travelled long distances and subjected themselves to harsh rigours in order that they might worship at the place where a Voice spoke to him out of a Bush that burned and was not consumed.

He would realize it was not himself they wished to worship, as they had worshipped in Egypt the miserable dust of the man, Rameses. They wished to do no more than commemorate his great initiation, but the worship was for the Mother of Christ, a Child of Israel, for she had filled their hearts with an especial love. They sought for the noblest gift they could make to her, and dedicated to her the chief, the culminating, sanctuary, of their new basilica.

It would have been more palpable then than now that in the architectural intention of the basilica, the Chapel of the Burning Bush was its dominating idea. It would have been just as palpable then, and it is very difficult to credit now, that

the dominating idea of the decorative intention was the superb mosaic in and above the apse. And in the mosaic, Moses himself, he would observe, is the main theme, three times expounded, twice in his supreme moments as recounted by the Old Testament, once in his supreme moment as recounted by the New.

The Old Testament Moses appears in the straight wall-surface above the vault. He is seen on the left kneeling before the Burning Bush, on the right holding the two Tables of the Law, with God shining down on him out of a nimbus. The Moses of the New Testament is seen in the apse below, in the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, himself on one side of Jesus and Elijah on the other, and below, the saints, James, Peter and John, struck with amazement at the right. The mosaic, then, is the tale of Moses as expounded in the two Testaments. It is the world's sublimest monument to Moses as rendered in terms of visible art, with which only one other can be compared, the Moses of Michelangelo, which is certainly its inferior in moral grandeur, though it may be its equal in splendour, and is, without doubt, its superior in vitality. Yet comparison at all seems foolish, above all in terms of vitality. For vitality was of the essence of the intention of Michelangelo's art, while mosaic in the early Christian centuries had, in a sense, an exactly opposite aim. It attained during that period, in Rome and Ravenna and here, in Mount Sinai, a quality no other art has ever attained and itself has never attained since. Its intention was to lay bare the eternal skeleton under the flesh of show, to make it pure and simple and rigid as a mountain, and as immortal.

Moses (as I have dared to imagine) has crossed the threshold of the basilica. He is looking up to the images of himself compounded out of countless cubes of stone. Are they, then, images at all? The broad forehead wrinkles and he strokes slowly his long beard. Those were images, the hawk-god, the cow-god, whose feet the deluded Egyptians kissed and fawned upon. Are these, too, images, which are as aloof and

intangible as a cloud or the sea's horizon? "Abominable" are they, in the sense of Anubis and Horus and the Baalim? An awareness stirs in him that even the Egyptians had made images whose beauty was such the watcher almost forgot their prime intention was to steal from the Most High the adoration which belonged to Him, and none other. And the Greeks since then had built images which made the contemplator forget everything but their own beauty. What is it now these Christians are creating? Is it not a form of image whose simplicity and dignity are such that the very mountains do not transcend them in those qualities, as it may be the Word itself, expressed in forms as craggy as its own characters?

The monk is getting a little impatient. He has not yet made out the full tally of the day's loaves for the Convent Beduin. This is Dmitri, who has that matter in hand.

"And now for the relics of St. Catherine," he promises. "Please, this way!"

The shadow which was beside me has gone out, as if a draught had caught one of the tapers. The monk goes ahead of me, keys clanging at his girdle.

The aspect of the basilica is not as it was in those early days. Its name is now St. Catherine and her relics are its chief pride. The monks had long ago proved their devotion to another Virgin, Christ's own mother, by dedicating to her their chief chapel. But when the fame of Catherine, the Virgin Martyr from Alexandria, spread throughout Christendom, a Virgin whose bones, it was believed, were carried by angels after her martyrdom to the top of Mount Sinai, the monks took her to themselves and poured out their hearts to her. It was she to whom they prayed for protection against the Saracen, and for rain when there had been drought. She had lived so long ago as the fourth century, and, having reproached a Roman Emperor with his paganism, and confuted his philosophers, had been tortured and beheaded. But the faithful, it seems, did not become aware of her till six

centuries later, and all that time her bones had lain untended on the top of Mount Sinai.

Thereafter, for one or two centuries, the monks from the Convent below laboriously climbed the mountain at least once each week to celebrate Mass at her shrine and collect the oil that flowed from her bones. Then, early in the thirteenth century, her bones were translated to the Convent below. Perhaps once again the monks had been troubled by those supernatural sights and sounds which had troubled them so much, long centuries ago, that they had implored the Emperor's legate to build the Convent, not on the mountain-top, as had been designed, but below in the valley. So they left to the Nazarene Virgin the dimness and silence of the Chapel of the Bush, and surrounded the Alexandrian with all they could amass of silver lamps and gold brocades and jewelled reliquaries. The tiny chapel where the desert was, and a single tree, seems a long way from that splendour. And behind the towering eikonostasis, crowned with three vast figures that reach almost to the roof, the superb mosaics are quite invisible. You must go round behind it and throw back your head and stare hard into the perpetual twilight. But Moses is harder to see than he was in the first centuries.

I imposed upon myself a pious duty during these first few days. I attempted to collect the references to Moses in eikon or inscription throughout the Convent, and though there may be more, even many more, they must be rather obscure. I assemble those references here.

The seal of the Convent is engraved with a design of three mountain peaks. Moses is seen on the summit of the central peak, receiving the Tables of the Law. In front of the right-hand peak St. Catherine is represented with a palm in one hand and resting with the other on a wheel. Between the central and left-hand peak the Virgin and Child are seen outlined against the Burning Bush. Another figure, perhaps Elijah, bearing a Cross and crowned with a halo, is seen in

front of the left-hand peak. The circular rim of the seal bears these words in Greek: "The Monastery of the Holy Mount Sinai where God walked, founded by Justinian the Great in the year of Christ 559."

There is a Greek inscription in relief on a marble plaque in the wall facing the garden courtyard: "This Holy Convent of Mount Sinai, where God spoke to Moses, was constructed from its foundation by the humble Emperor of the Romans, Justinian, to his own eternal memory and that of his wife, Theodora. It was finished in the thirtieth year of his reign. The Emperor there appointed a Superior, Doulas by name, in the year 6021 after Adam, the 577th year after Christ." The tablet is of the thirteenth century, but is doubtless the copy of one set up soon after the foundation of the Convent.

A sixth-century inscription in Greek above the Byzantine entrance-door in that same wall reads: "In this place the Lord said to Moses: I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac. I am He Who is the God of Jacob. This is the door of God. Let just men enter here!"

In the basilica are the mosaics already spoken of, and four eikons. The mosaics are more easily visible than they were in the time of Laborde, whose line-drawings first gave an idea of the magnificent composition to a western public. He found them so blackened over with the smoke of lamps and candles, the light of which shone so awkwardly in his eyes, that he was not quite sure whether Moses was or was not beardless. The mosaics have been scraped since. The most visible of the eikons is also one of the finest in the Convent. It is on the south wall, not far from the door, and represents Moses receiving the Decalogue from a Hand stretched forth out of a cloud. He is a very Byzantine Moses, beardless as he is in nearly all the eikons, very stiff and grave in his blue toga. He stands on a bright-green mountain-top outlined against a heavy gold background. On one side, the Bush burns blood-red. He has removed his jet-black sandals and placed them on a low mound. Hard by one of the votive sarcophagi of

Saint Catherine is a charming Renaissance representation of the Infant Moses. The background is a European mediæval city. By the bank of the river, in the foreground, stands an almost Rubensesque princess with a crown and flowing garments. A black slave holds up an empty cradle while a small child stands up amid a crowd of gaily attired attendant maidens. Two later eikons contain a picture of Moses. In the sanctuary there is a Virgin Mary, with Moses on one side and St. Stephen on the other. There is an eikon of Moses and St. Catherine on the fourth column on the right. St. Catherine is holding a kerchief which represents the Convent as it was in the eighteenth century.

There is a fine eikon of Moses in the Library, similar to the first described in the basilica, but with more detail. The toga is in shades of pale and dark-blue. The Hand holding the Decalogue extends from a glory made up out of two crystal star-spangled circles of heaven. There are palms in the landscape. At the foot of the picture is the artist himself, perhaps, adoring the Prophet. The eikon bears the legend: "Prophetus Moesis."

But the interest of the Library is rather in the word than in the image. I asked the Librarian if he had any books solely devoted to the life or the teachings of Moses, but he could not lay his hands on any. He showed me instead two framed documents of great interest, one a copy, one the original. Of the first I had already seen another copy in the Archbishop's study in Cairo. The following story is told regarding it. On one of his journeys, Mohammed, accompanied by Ali his son-in-law, chanced to alight at the Convent. He was so kindly received there, that (unable to write himself) he requested Ali to draw up a *firman*, a charter. This document granted protection to the Nazarenes and the places they lived in, appointed that they were not to pay poll-taxes and that they were to receive tithes. Mohammed sealed the document with the palm of his blackened hand, which, in both of the copies I saw, seemed rather smaller than life-size. The monks state that

the original document was taken off to Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan, Selim, after his conquest of Egypt, early in the sixteenth century, though no-one seems ever to have seen it, either before or since. Certain writers believe there may never have been an original document; the copies, however, have undoubtedly helped the monks and their foundation round some extremely dangerous corners for a great many centuries.

There is no mention of Moses in Mohammed's document, but there is in the document signed by a later conqueror, who did not conquer Egypt. This is a letter written in the year 1798 by Napoleon Buonaparte, who had occupied Alexandria two years earlier. Once again certain immunities and privileges are granted to the monks, by one who wishes to show favour, as he writes, "to the Convent of Mount Sinai, in order that they may hand on to future ages the tradition of our conquest, and out of respect for Moses and the Jewish nation, whose cosmogeny we trace back to the most ancient ages."

But the document one is most conscious of in the Library is neither the letter from Mohammed nor the letter from Napoleon. It is a document which is not there at all—namely, the celebrated Codex Sinaiticus, which, after a long sojourn in Mount Sinai, and a briefer sojourn in the Kremlin, is now housed in the British Museum. The Librarian here on Mount Sinai displayed as keen a sense of injury as the Archbishop in Cairo did during a meeting I described earlier.

The Codex is a manuscript which, according to its self-styled discoverer, Tischendorff, "we are led by all the data upon which we calculate the antiquity of documents, to assign to the middle of the fourth century." It is not even impossible, he says, that it was one of the fifty copies of the Bible which in the year 331 the Emperor Constantine ordered to be executed for Constantinople; in which case this very copy was probably sent as a present by the Emperor Justinian, the founder of the Monastery, to his new foundation. Tis-

chendorff explains to us how on visiting the Convent in 1844 he saw, in the middle of the hall, a basket full of old manuscripts, and was told that two similar basketfuls had been burned. He was on that occasion allowed to take away forty-five of the sheets, he tells us; but, having received a commission from the Emperor of Russia, whether for the original or a copy he does not make clear, he returned to the Convent in 1859, and, finding the whole manuscript wrapped in a red cloth in a monk's cell, he carried it off to Russia. It did not leave Russia again till it made its journey to London.

The monks claim that most of Tischendorff's story is untrue. It was not he who was the discoverer of the manuscript, but the Russian archimandrite, Porphyrios Ouspensky. It was a falsehood that two baskets full of leaves from the Codex had been burned. He carried away the first forty-five leaves by pretending the cold air of Sinai gave him lumbago and he wished to copy them out in comfort in Cairo. It was only by discreditably joining in an intrigue regarding the appointment of a new *oikonomos*, that he managed to lay hold of the rest of the manuscript. As for the certificate the Kremlin had, showing the Codex was an outright gift from the Archbishop Callistratos and his monks, it was a forged document not worth the ink it was written with. The fact was, the Convent owned important properties in Bessarabia at that time, which the Tsar threatened to confiscate unless Callistratos made out a deed of gift to him. Further, direct pressure was brought to bear on the unhappy pontiff. He had just been elected Archbishop and had presented himself for consecration to the Patriarch in Jerusalem. The Russians threatened that unless he did what was asked of him, he would not be allowed to return to Sinai.

So it was that the Codex passed into the hands of the Kremlin; so it is that it is now in the hands of the British Museum. And it would be an act of grace to bring these considerations before the authorities in London, said the two venerable monks plaintively. For when Justinian con-

signed our Codex to us, there was no London yet, or very little.

I said I would tell the tale of this bad man, Tischendorff. They sighed heavily. It did not seem as if they had a strong hope they would have their Codex back again.

I now repaired to those vestiges of Moses and his tale within the Convent walls, which are recounted neither in images nor words. Close beside the basilica, in the massive and shadowy laundry facing the tower, you find the Well of the Daughters of Jethro, where first Moses met Zipporah, his bride. It is roofed over with reeded palms. A low stone parapet encircles the well. The place smells of suds and dishes left lying about and plaited baskets gone rancid with the damp. It is not a monument which carries conviction, if only because it is within a few yards of the place of the Bush, though the text implies that Moses had to set out on a journey before he came to the back of the wilderness, and the Bush, and the Voice that spoke from it. Nailed on an exterior wall of one of the Cyclopean granaries is the Burning Bush itself, or, as the monks concede, a graft from the original Bush, which was still growing in the place where Moses had seen it, in the sixth century, when the monks came to build a chapel on that same site. That carries, perhaps, less conviction than Jethro's well. It grows in the centre of a blue-and-white-painted wooden archway on a sand-coloured cement base five feet high. A painted fence protects it from the sardonic proprietary cats that march all day up and down the dark alleys broken by sudden gaps of sun. It was a thorny trailer, perhaps a rose, or a raspberry, with dark-green leaves. To the left of it grows a graft from Aaron's rod, which has now branched out into a number of thin saplings tied round with cord and bound by staples to the wall. It seemed like some sort of tiny-leaved acacia.

The remaining vestiges of Moses and his tale lie outside the Convent walls. They are not made by hands, and their

history is not to be counted in thousands of years. Some of them, like the Mountain itself, and the Plain, are eikons grander than the mosaics and tablets graven with older laws than the Decalogue. Others are punier, like the Rock of the Striking, and the Mould of the Calf's Head. It seemed to us, as we went wandering about among them, that the monks and the Beduin between them had with great good fortune found assembled here almost every site and object connected with the tale of Moses, excepting only the Desert of the Forty Years' Wandering.

Of all these, of course, the Mountain is the most notable. The monks seemed rather anxious we should get the Mountain climbed and done with; or I should not say the monks so much as Dmitri. Dmitri is the monk I have already spoken of, who took me round the basilica. He had us in hand now.

He came from Upper Egypt and talked French. He was the distributor-in-chief of loaves to the Beduin, but he had been instructed to look after us in his spare time. He wore opaque glasses, and it was difficult to judge what he thought about things. He thought a lot, I imagine. He was the most intelligent of the younger set, if the phrase might be used. You could not think of the older monks in terms of mere intelligence. Those more than socratic beards removed them behind a veil even more impenetrable than Dmitri's thick spectacles. Sometimes they actually spoke to you. Sometimes they gathered round a table with the lay brothers to sieve flour, as if they had not spent half a century on Mount Sinai, as if they were still lay brothers themselves. But despite the ripple of monkly small talk, despite the cats rubbing against their legs, they persisted in their pantheon, aloof, shrouded in their beards.

Each evening Dmitri asked would we not ascend Gebel Musa, as if the sooner we got it over the better. But I could not think of Gebel Musa as something to get over. It seemed to me rather something to lead up to. In a sense, a good deal

of my life had been leading up to it, though I had often walked for long distances in a contrary direction.

The Holy Mountain was the climax of the wanderings of Israel, though later, the penal wanderings once over, all the lands resounded with their victories, from Edom to Bashan. It was the climax of the tremendous tale of Moses the Lawgiver, he would never stand nearer the glory of heaven, though once again, and once only, he would find himself so completely alone, that day when he came to the top of Mount Nebo and looked down on the Promised Land, and looked away from it, and for the last time sought the form of the Lord, and saw Him face to face, and spoke with Him mouth to mouth.

“The arrival at the foot of Mount Sinai,” the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire writes, “marks the beginning of Israel’s spiritual history. We reach what was the kernel and core of the nation’s life, the Covenant by which all the tribes were united in allegiance to One God, the Covenant by which a priest-people was created, and a Kingdom of God on earth inaugurated among the children of men.”

The text expresses it in a language not often excelled in sublimity. “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.”

It was in the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, we are told, that they came into the wilderness of Sinai, and on that same day Moses went up unto God. And the Lord spoke with him and commanded him to sanctify the people, and to put bounds round the foot of the Mountain so that the people should not come too close, for in the third day the Lord would come down in the sight of all the people upon Mount Sinai.



THE SHEIKH OF THE CONVENT SLAVES

And Moses did as the Lord bade him, and brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God, though not without difficulty, the legend tells us; for though the first peals thundered on the Mountain at the first moment of daybreak, the people slept like sacks in the enlapping sweetness of the high air, and Moses must needs go from tent to tent awakening them, crying: "Awake, awake! The bridegroom is at hand, the Lord of Israel! He awaits to lead his bride under the marriage-canopy." So the people awoke, and Moses led them to the bounds of the Mountain, and himself went up into the heights. But now the yearning of the bride for the bridegroom was so intense, that the people threatened to break the bounds and go rashly up into the smoke, which was as the smoke of a furnace, and into the fire and the lightning, so that Moses must descend again and bid them keep afar off. And the Lord lifted up the Torah, which is the Law, above their heads, and cried out to them: "Is it the will of Israel that the Lord deliver the Torah unto Moses and Moses unto Israel?" and the people cried: "It is the will of Israel and the bounty of the Lord," and forthwith, a hundred and twenty myriads of angels descended, and crowned every Israelite with an angelic crown and girdled him with an angelic girdle, which things, alas, they did not retain long, for when they set up on an altar the golden image of a calf, and declared this was their Lord, the myriads of angels came down with woe and weeping and took their crowns from them again and ungirdled them of their girdles.

But that doleful day was later. To-day was the day of a glory beyond reckoning and of miracle such as had no precedent and would not be repeated. And the heavens opened (the legend continues)  the Holy Mountain tore itself from its earthly roots and into the air so that its summit touched the Lord's footstool, and a cloud of glory covered the flanks of it; and the cloud was the adoring companies of angels, on the one side twenty-two thousand, on the second side sixty myriads, three thousand five hundred

and fifty, on the third side twice as many, and on the fourth side, more than even Gabriel could count, or Michael.

And the Lord spoke on the top of the Mountain, declaring himself the Lord, the God of Israel, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; and uttered the Ten Words, known also as the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, or the Covenant, or the Testimony, which Words are the most familiar to mortal ears, in our western world, at least, saving only those other later Words, known as the Lord's Prayer. And when He uttered the first of the Ten Words, thunder and lightning came forth from the Lord's mouth, and in each hand He held a torch like a burning mountain, and the people in terror of those sounds and sights fell back twelve miles from the bounds at the foot of the Mountain, and lay there piled together like dead men in a battlefield. And Moses turned to the Lord and cried: "Is it for the dead or the living that Thy Testimony is attested, O Lord?" And the Lord replied: "For the living!" And He bedewed their cold foreheads with that dew with which all the generations of the earth's dead will be revived on the last day, and Israel rose again, and the light came back into their eyes, and hearing into their ears, and so they saw and hearkened, whilst the Lord proclaimed the second Word, and the third, and the fourth, even unto the tenth.

And as He spoke, there was no sound else heard in the universe. The grass did not rustle in the world below, nor the seas roar, nor the birds sing, nor the oxen low; and in the world above, the Cherubim and Seraphim did not proclaim their: Holy, holy, holy.

On this occasion, this once and this once only, was it given to the host that they might hear that Voice, and see the smoke and fire on the top of the Mountain, and not die with the glory of it. And they themselves knew that if they heard and saw a second time, they would die, no dew would revive them. Wherefore they asked of Moses: "Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we

die." And Moses said: "Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear be before you, that ye sin not." So the people stood afar off, and Moses builded an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel, and sent young men to offer burnt offerings, and to sacrifice peace offerings of oxen. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on those young men that were with him, and said: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these Words." And this being done, Moses drew near at last to the thick darkness where God was, bringing with him seventy elders, and Joshua to be his companion. And half-way up the Mountain, the elders halted, and Moses drew away from them, and they saw the God of Israel, "and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the very heaven for clearness." And Joshua went further, to the very limit of the region where any mortal other than Moses might go and not be blinded and consumed with fire. And there they stayed six days, and on the seventh the Lord called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

And Moses entered unto the cloud, unto the Lord. And there the Lord wrote down upon two tablets of stone the Ten Words he had spoken and gave them to his Prophet, and these are the major commandments, which have governed the moral behaviour of man from that day to this, and are not likely to be superseded in their general content while this planet still spins on its axis. And when these were written down, the Lord set Himself down as a schoolmaster with His chosen pupil and revealed to Moses the multitude of the minor commandments, which are commonly called the Book of the Covenant or equally, the Torah, which means Instruction. And these many judgments and ordinances were written down in the interspaces between the Ten Commandments on the same tables of sapphire stone, which tables were made by God's own hand on the evening of the first

Sabbath, the climax of all His labours, before He rested on the seventh day. And during that same sojourn on the top of the Mountain, it is recorded, the Lord demanded that Israel make Him a sanctuary, that He might dwell among them; and He showed Moses the pattern of that Tabernacle, of all the furniture in it and all the vestments of its attendant priests. And this sojourn lasted forty days and forty nights; though for a time, as it is written in the Talmud, the Prophet was hard put to it to distinguish between the nights and days, for there is no darkness in Heaven, and midnight is as bright as noon.

But not a week had passed before he had observed certain portents, and he was in doubt no longer. Those were days, he learned, wherein the angels praised God with "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," and those were nights wherein the angels sang, "Blessed be the Lord to whom blessing is due." And when they suspended their singing, if it was day, the angels betook themselves to the preparations of manna, pounding it in their celestial mortars; if it was night, they were busy sending it down to earth, to the plain where Israel was encamped by the trees and the streams. But if Moses was in a territory where angels were few or absent, he marked another sign, which could not fail him; for when he beheld the sun come to the Throne and adore it, it was night on earth, and when the moon and stars came, it was day.

And forty days went by, and forty nights, and Moses came out from under the hem of the cloud. And Joshua whom he had left behind to await him there, turned his eyes away, because of the great light that shone from the skin of his face. As for the seventy elders that had gone up with them, among them Aaron and his two sons, nothing is said regarding them. Perhaps certain of them grew afraid on the fringe of those storms. Perhaps they fell upon doubt, saying: He delays to come down. He will never come down. So after certain days they went down to the Plain. And when the Theophany

was fulfilled, Moses went after them, and beside him, Joshua his companion.

"When do we climb the Mountain, then?" asked one of my friends. "To-morrow?" He, too, like the monk, Dmitri, was getting a little impatient.

"No, not to-morrow," I said.

"When?"

"Let us look at it from the Plain, first."

"We can only see Ras Safsafeh."

"That is a good deal, I think. There are certain other things to see in the Plain, and under the Mountain."

It was early afternoon. We walked down the narrow convent valley, the Wadi ed Deir, to Gebel Haroun, the small hall which stands where the wadi opens out into the Plain and Sheikh Saleh's wadi lunges off north-eastward. There was not a sound anywhere, neither in the Plain, nor anywhere on the mountain-slopes. We looked up towards Ras Safsafeh. It is a mountain made up out of four vast cliffs, of which that on the extreme right is the largest. An immense cavern is hewn out between it and the cliff next to it. The second and third are equal, two huge beasts, crouching. The fourth is craggy and pointed and removed.

"It looks very quiet up there now," said Jim.

"It all happened a long time ago."

"How long ago?"

"About thirteen hundred years before Christ."

"No!" came from Lucas.

"No!" I repeated. I was in no mood to discuss theories regarding the date of the Decalogue, and the Book of the Covenant, and the building of the Tabernacle.

The heat and silence seemed a little perversely to have vitalized Jim into an unusual condition of curiosity.

"Why do you both say no?" he insisted.

"I say yes as well as no." So did Lucas. So far as our little reading clarified it for us, the situation seemed so.

Moses was thirteen hundred years before Christ. To doubt that Moses consigned the Decalogue to Israel is to doubt Moses; but in that remote age it is probable all the Ten Words were phrased as simply as the first, the sixth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth, in the form in which they have come down to us. The other five were amplified centuries later, when Israel was a people in its own land. Similarly he phrased certain of the laws in the Book of the Covenant, but most of them were invented and administered later, when the wanderers had fields to till and a hearthstone to sit by. That was the time when the Tabernacle described in Exodus was set up, the fearful box to house the awe of God, of which the Lord showed Moses the pattern on the summit of Sinai. Or it may be the Tabernacle of Exodus was never set up at all, being unsuceptible to human hands, a Tabernacle of Dreams, a major Poem of the priestly Poets of a far later day.

But the Poem of the Tabernacle was not written yet; or, if some approximation of the first Architect's pattern was ever made, the building was not built yet. With the stone tables in his hand, and in his heart the Book of the Covenant and the pattern of the Tabernacle, Moses is descending the Mountain, with Joshua by his side. It is Joshua who first hears the noise of the people as they shout. "There is a noise of war in the camp!" he cries. And Moses listens hard, for the noise of the other clamour is hardly yet out of his ears. "No, no!" he decides. "It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that sing do I hear."

And indeed, if it was in truth the slope of the mountain now called Gebel Musa that Moses was descending, and if Joshua joined him on the saddle between Gebel Musa and Ras Safsaféh, they would hear the sound coming up from the plain long before they could see the Thing that caused it, and not know was it the sound of war, had the Amalekites

come down from the hills and fallen on them, or was it the sound of feasting; and if it was, how came it that they feasted and made merry, when they should be weeping and at prayer, prostrate upon their foreheads? Then at last the Thing came into view, the idol, the flung hair of the leaping men and women, the unspeakable treachery. It must have seemed to Moses for one moment his whole body was his heart, and his bones must crack like dry twigs in the breaking of it. Blue sky and red hills were black as night. He heard no more the clapping of hands or the singing. It was as if a hurricane were howling in his ears.

The hurricane ceased. The blackness was unrolled from the hills and the sky. He felt his heart beating in its accustomed place, constricted and forlorn and ice-cold with anger. He cast the Tables out of his hands, and brake them at the foot of the mount. He strode over to the altar and took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it, the water of bitterness, concerning which it is written, "it shall go into thy bowels, and make thy belly to swell, and thy thighs to fall away." The stream where he did these things is shown at this day in the Wadi Ledja, under the further flank of the mountain, the water from several springs flowing in one channel, and dying soon in the thirsty sands of Er Rahah.

But the anger had not died in Moses. It seemed to the host as he stood among them that they had never known this man. His face seemed bloodless as a bone in the desert. His eyes were like glass, he did not see them any more. If he seemed alive and not an image, it was because his head was at one side, as if a Voice spoke to him, but they could not hear it. At last he spoke, calling for those that were on the Lord's side, and all the sons of Levi gathered themselves unto him. "And he said unto them: Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel. Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp,

and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour. And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men."

And in the midst of that slaying, Moses went off from the people, to the Tent of Meeting which was beyond the furthest line of the tents. His chin lay upon his breast, his shoulders were bowed, his feet shuffled like the feet of an old man who has lived too long. No-one saw him for many days.

So we emerged from the Convent wadi between the Holy Mountain of Moses and the ill-omened Hill of Aaron and turned left-handed to fulfil the pilgrim's round. We were duly taken to the Rock which Moses struck, a red granite block some ten feet high, which has ten strange mouth-shaped holes in it, from which once ten streams of water flowed to quench the thirst of ten of the twelve tribes. The other two did not go thirsty. It is merely time that has stopped two of the holy mouths. We had seen that Rock earlier, of course, and were to see it later; but it did not seem any less credible than the others.

Then we turned again and came to a certain rock with a water-worn basin in one of its surfaces, and this was the Hollow-of-the-Cow, we were told, the mould in which the renegades cast the head of their idol. But it was a very amorphous hollow, nearer the size and shape of a hippopotamus's head than a cow's, and the creature in the narrative was, in fact, not a cow, but a calf. We gather from it, also, that the idol was not cast in a mould at all. For when the people broke off their ear-rings, as Aaron had requested them, and gave him the gold, "he received it at their hands, and fashioned it a Golden Calf." And that would seem to confirm the suggestion that the idol was merely a wooden figure plated over with gold, a fashion of idol-making the Israelites may have known of in Egypt—such a figure, in

fact, as Moses would not have excessive difficulty in burning with fire and grinding into powder and strewing upon the water.

But Aaron himself gives us still another account of the genesis of the idol, when he seeks to defend himself against his brother's bitter reproaches. "I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf"; doubtless none was more surprised than himself that the stuff melted and flowed together and a full-fledged abomination stood among the flames, evilly glistening.

The Talmudic commentators are troubled by the whole episode and proceed to explain away the behaviour of the host and their High Priest with a rather forlorn ingenuity. It was ultimately all the Devil's fault, not theirs. They had been waiting forty days for Moses to come down from the Mountain, and by noon on the fortieth day he was still not there. A murmur of doubt went round among the ranks. Quick to seize on his opportunity, the Devil conjured up a vision of Moses lying dead on a bier half-way between earth and heaven. Then the heart went out of the host completely. This Lord of Israel that Moses had told them of had seemed from the beginning very far and difficult. Now with Moses dead, he seemed much further away than ever before. Perhaps he was not there at all. Suddenly a gust of nostalgia swept through them. They were sick of the Lord, of Moses, of Aaron, of the desert. They wanted Egypt. They must have Egypt, the warmth, the ease, the lewdness. They wanted to dance and sing. They wanted a god they could kiss and dance round, an Egyptian Bull, or an Egyptian Cow—Hathor, Apis, Mnevis, any of them!

Aaron, Aaron, they cried, and what, the Talmud asks, might Aaron do? He knew the infamy they asked of him, to make them an abomination and set it up in the Lord's place. But what if he refused? They would slay their priest and prophet and still make themselves an image; they would have two unforgivable sins to expiate, not one. So he

bethought himself what he might do. And then it occurred to him that if he asked them for their personal adornments, they might refuse and the whole matter come to naught. And the women did, indeed, refuse, but the men did not; so he assembled the ear-rings into a heap and threw them into a fire, hoping that the gold would flow away into the sand, even as water does. And it happened that among those ear-rings a certain Israelite had brought a magic token, a silver leaf impressed with the image of a bull, one of those same four tokens with which Moses earlier had caused the body of Joseph to issue from its sepulchre. And the gold did not flow away, but flowed together instead, "and there came out this Calf."

And there came out this calf. And why, the legend asks, was it a calf rather than any other beast? No, not because the children of Israel had seen the calf worshipped on the altars of Egypt. Not because the Bull had been their fertility-symbol still earlier, in Canaan, before they had left for Egypt. No. But because during the crossing of the Red Sea, they had looked up into the heavens, and had beheld the Throne of God and the four Creatures that stand about it, and the Bull was the Creature they had seen most clearly.

"Build us a bull!" they cried. "Or if the gold won't run to that—a calf will do, Aaron!" And then they cried again: "An altar, let us now build an altar unto our god!" But Aaron said: "Am I not your priest? Shall not I build you an altar?" So he went about that task as slowly as he might, hoping from one hour to the next that Moses might at last come down from the Mountain. But he did not. And the host set up an altar and the image on it, and danced about it and kissed it, and were lewd.

And Moses at length came down from the Mountain, and did with the image as the Book tells. And went off at length to the Tent of Meeting, and went back to the Mountain after many days.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon, still quite warm in the sun, immediately cold in the shade. We moved again into sun and out of wind. We had been following the one and avoiding the other for an hour or more.

It is not hard, I said to myself, for even a sluggish or cynical imagination to conceive these events taking place much as they are described against this background of plain and mountain and sky. It is only because of the overwhelming suitability of each to each that the monks and the Beduin allow their imagination to run riot and achieve their fantastic identifications. That well in the Convent, clearly, is not Jethro's well. That hollowed-out stone is not the mould of a golden calf which, as it seems, was not moulded. That rock is not the rock which Moses struck, or it is only one of many. But a hundred circumstances of timeless aspect and present custom compel us to accept the larger features in the landscape for the rôles that have been assigned to them. This is the Holy Mountain. We can credit no other. Gebel Haroun, so ominously close to the base of it, can be nothing but Aaron's hill, so close that the mind must darkly speculate if good and evil are, after all, no more than obverse and reverse of the same cloud. The altar to the Calf must have looked not unlike the Sheikh's tomb on the top of the hill. The merrymakings round the altar then must have been very similar to the Beduin's annual *rikkab*, or cavalcade, at this same place. There is a cemetery between Gebel Haroun and the foot of Safsafeh. There are five sheikhs' tombs built out of the stone with which five hermits once built their hermitages; but for the most part the graves are wedge-shaped mounds of sand, banked up with small boulders of granite and porphyry. The feet of the dead extend towards Mecca, the place of another Prophet. Some graves have a palm-branch stuck under the headstone, others are planted with a rootless sprig of desert scrub. The cemetery looks most lonely in the heart of these hills, lonely and ancient; as if it is not the Muslim dead that are buried here, but the dead of Israel,

those that were slain that day when Moses bade the men of Levi go about in the camp with a sword.

It is late and cold. Only the tops of the hills retain the wine-flush and rose-flush of sunset, excepting Safsafeh, which stands in front of the rest, still folding the glory round itself the whole way to its base. On the right hand of the Wadi ed Deir the Convent is plunged in profound gloom, like the pall cast by the sun's eclipse. There is no shelter now from the wind anywhere. It would be better to rise now and go back into the Convent.

§ 3

The monks of the Convent seem a happy enough company, though they live a life as rigid as it is secluded. They rise at two-thirty in the morning and nothing crosses their lips till they take a cup of coffee several hours later, after Mass. Then they work for several hours again, and a gong calls them to lunch in the refectory, where they sit down at a long carved table between granite walls decorated with a row of pallid frescoes, and with the graven escutcheons of pious noblemen who made the pilgrimage to Sinai long centuries ago. There they take their frugal repast while one of the brethren intones over their heads a passage from some sacred book. They rarely eat meat, some of them never, and meat is never eaten in the refectory. They receive two Egyptian pounds a month, which most of them send to their folk in Greece, and a small ration of spirits, which is no luxury in that searching air. Before the War the community was rich, having an income of some twenty-five thousand pounds. Its properties in Rumania were confiscated before the War, those in Serbia during the War, and those in Bessarabia after. But their most grievous loss, morally as well as financially, has been the defection of Russia from the Orthodox Church. They have property in Cyprus and Crete which brings in but little revenue to-day. The substance of their income is the Convent in

Cairo and the hermitages and gardens in the peninsula. They are poor and have been rich, and it may be for that reason that pilgrims who can afford it have been asked to pay heavily for the privilege of staying at the Convent. As for us, I can only report we were treated with the utmost kindness.

They do not wear their austerity on their sleeves like a badge. If you were to stay for no more than a couple of days in the Convent, you might easily carry away the impression that the place is a sort of holy bakehouse and breadshop, and that the monks are a race of holy grocers. In one way or another they seem to be busy with grain or bread at most hours of the day. In the morning you might see them gathered round a table spread with a heap of grain, which they are sifting into fine and coarse. The three big ones will be there, too, as they have been there for fifty years. It looks odd, at first. You have a feeling that they might be doing something a little more exalted with their spare time. They might be writing a history of the Convent, or copying out ancient documents, or perhaps painting eikons, as their predecessors did. Then it occurs to you they might actually be doing any or all those things, months on end, years on end. They have time enough, all the time in the world. In the meantime, now and again, they sift grain with their brothers, the young novices from the Greek islands. There is no high and low among them; and to sift grain is as exalted labour as to write histories, and each is as a breath of wind compared with the labour of prayer. Other monks haunt like Samsons the Gazæan caverns below ground-level. In one a blindfold donkey treads his endless round, pulling a vast spar which grinds the sifted corn between mill-stones. In another, a roller like a part of a ship's engine winnows the stuff in a vast sarcophagus. Above, the convent Beduin assemble to receive their ration of loaves, five each every two days. The sheikhs get eight each. The flour is made of mixed corn and maize. Out in the courtyard the Beduin who have eaten their ration wait in the hope of getting another before it is due. A loaf appears

from somewhere, then it disappears into thin air, or into the fold of a *djellabiye*. There is too much maize in the bread to-day. To-day's bread is fine and soft. You might as well eat a stone as to-day's bread. . . . It is bread all day, and again bread. A bakehouse. A grocery-shop.

The Convent Beduin are now about four hundred in number. They are called Gebelliye and deem themselves a clan of the great Towara tribe. They look as Beduin as their neighbours, but they are, in fact, descended from the garrison of a hundred Egyptian and a hundred Wallachian soldiers which Justinian sent to defend his Convent-fortress. They do all the menial work in the Convent and look after the gardens. They were Christians like their masters for a century or two, but Islam was too powerful for them, and the monks were too sensible of the delicacy of their position to endeavour to restrain them from the new faith. That sensibility has always been one of the guiding influences of the monks' behaviour, and they seem never to have made any effort to win back their own slaves to Christ, or to win new converts from the surrounding desert. Their position was once, in fact, so delicate that they found themselves compelled to build a mosque within the sacred precincts of their Convent, cheek by jowl with their basilica; that was early in the fourteenth century, at the time when the Sultan Melik en Nessir Mohammed was making things very unpleasant for the Christians all over Egypt. But quite soon that bad Sultan died, and in course of time the anti-Christian fervour dwindled. But the mosque survives as a memorial to that age, for a holy place of Islam once built cannot be unbuilt. However, the worship is not fervent there, for only the Convent Beduin are the worshippers, and the monks have them well in hand. It is only during the month of Ramadan the Beduin are allowed to enter it, which they do daily, and light a lamp there, and so keep it sanctified. But most of the mosque is now a store-room and from year to year the lumber accumulates, chicken coops and pails and worn-

out baskets. For the monks are very fond of them, they are their little fathers, but you are conscious they despise them, too. They are underdogs, nobodies. They have been Christian and are not. They are Muslims and very timorous ones. When they repair to the festival on Gebel Haroun or the tomb of Sheikh Saleh, the other tribesmen look at them askance. So they return to the Convent, to the thick-bearded ones, whom they revere almost idolatrously. Somewhere under the walls of the basilica the two Tables of the Law of Nebi Musa lie buried. And when, in their own good time, the monks want rain, they consult the Tables of the Law and and go up on the mountain-top and bid the rain come.

Allah bless the good monks, the kind bread-giving monks! Allah did we say? Was that always Allah's name? A disturbing memory flickers across their skulls. Allah? Allah? Ah well, the Nebi Saleh is always safe! Saleh bless the good monks! May they live long!

But when the doling out of bread is over and the Beduin have gone off to their tents, the monks go into their own lives as into a room. Sometimes the room is as large as the basilica, for more hours a day and night than it is easy to compute; sometimes it is as small as their own cells. The centre of their lives in basilica or cell is prayer, yet now and again, briefly, they live their own dim individual lives.

The three big ones have their living-quarters between the rest-house and the basilica; they have to be accessible, it may be, in case of a sudden crisis, though I do not suppose a sudden crisis has presented itself for a good many ceaturies. The other monks and the lay brothers seemed to live a long way from everywhere. I felt it strange I could do so much walking in and out of alley-ways in the space constricted by the convent-walls; but I found that was because I went round three of the four walls to get to them, while in fact they live quite close to the visitors' rooms, separated by a rather dreadful new building they are putting up, at present mainly

cement and naked iron rods. They live in an irregular conglomeration of cells round a close, sometimes one storey high, sometimes with a second storey balanced precariously on wooden pillars. The door of each cell has a cross painted on it or framed above the lintel. Some have vines trained round their doorways, or little gardens banked under their windows, but the vines and gardens look as apologetic as the monks themselves. After all, monks do not betake themselves to convents to spend their whole lives there, in order that they might flatter the eye's lust with earthly flowers.

Those who have no gardens have cats, at least. Or it might be said the cats have monks. They sit in their laps or perch on their shoulders like familiar spirits. One had a canary. It did not astonish me it looked so woe-begone at the conflux of that regiment of cats, though indeed, the cats showed no awareness of its existence, it was so mangy a morsel of birdhood.

They did not keep their birds in cages in the old days, I mused, as I wandered that evening into the monks' close. I recalled the old legend that tells how the monks fed a hundred ravens every day in the Convent kitchen, to repay them for having fed Elijah in his cave. I recalled, too, how Maundeville has a little enriched the story. In addition to this quotidian visit, he tells us, all the ravens, choughs and crows in the neighbourhood used to set out once a year to the Convent in solemn pilgrimage, each bearing a branch of bay or olive in its beak, just as human pilgrims on organized pilgrimages often wear armlets.

The canary was not the only bird in the monks' close, I observed. The three birds were here I had noticed the evening we had entered the Convent, the white pigeon, the blue-gray dove and the speckled-brown partridge. I had remarked their absence, and concluded that it had been permitted to eat meat, and the sick ones had eaten them, as Porphyrios had said they would. But that had not happened, and once again the monk Cyrillos was with them. He had



THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LAW

them on a table outside his cell, and was whispering to them, cozening them with a fly-blown lettuce leaf. The two birds that had been so restless, the dove and the partridge, stood quite still with their heads on one side, listening. The pigeon was poking its head forward and withdrawing it again every few moments. Its eye was bright and interested. I felt I liked Cyrillos from Chios. He was not yet having a happy time himself, so he devoted himself to making time happier for creatures even more helpless. I had seen him lead a black donkey and a white donkey through the convent-gates earlier that day. For some reason, the black one suddenly got depressed. He put his head over the white donkey's shoulder and snuffled and wept. "Come on, *mavriko!* Little black one!" cried Cyrillos. But the black donkey kept on weeping. So Cyrillos lifted up his soutane and brought out two dazzling pieces of lump sugar. "There now! No! Lift your head first! That's fine! One for you! One for you!" Bliss came into the eyes of the two donkeys as they crunched the fabulous dainty. A shudder of delight rippled along their hides. "Come now!" said the novice. They picked up their hoofs and stepped daintily toward their stables.

Two monks sat outside their cell doors reading aloud from some holy book. One was a very old man. I had not seen him before and did not see him again. They said he had been born in Smyrna ninety-seven years ago, but he looked older than that. His white beard went down to his waist, the hair of his head went down to his shoulders. There they sat chanting, balancing on one leg of their ricketty chairs. I was afraid they would come down. The younger one could stand it; if the older one fell, I was certain he would crack half his bones. But both kept their balance, still intoning endlessly as they swayed to and fro. The voice of the elder one was rather querulous, as if he felt the martyrs might have managed it differently somehow. The younger one had a gentle voice, as gentle as his face, now flushed in the last

rays of the setting sun. He did not notice me for several minutes, for he had been so engrossed in his book. Then he saw me, and smiled; we had already talked together. His name was Dmitri, and he came from Zante. He signalled me over to his cell. At this moment the other Dmitri came in, or rather, one of the other Dmitris, the Dmitri from Cairo. He came bustling in busily, he always had something to do. He came and spoke a few words to the Dmitri from Zante.

"Zante is a rather holy island," I ventured. The eyes of Dmitri from Zante beamed. "Perhaps!" said Dmitri from Cairo rather sharply. "But Corfu is just as holy!" He had lived in Corfu before he went to live in Cairo. It was interesting to see those two Dmitris together. They were both in their early twenties. They would be both subjected to exactly the same influences for the next forty years. They would be as different from each other at the end of that time as two people of different classes living in different countries. Dmitri from Cairo would be consumed with a secret ambition to become Archbishop, though he would often impose penances on himself for indulging the sin of vanity. But the Archbishop has to be elected from among the monks by the monks themselves, and Dmitri of Cairo would never be popular enough for that. He would become *oikonomos*, and die with the account-books in his hand. Dmitri of Zante would have no ambition at all. He would always be the gentlest of them all. He would be so loved, there would be a strong feeling in favour of making him Archbishop. But it would be pointed out by a hard-headed minority that the Archbishop has to be a man of affairs, after all. He lives in Cairo, and sees people, and goes about to functions. So they would make Dmitri of Zante Father Superior, and he would die with a smile on his face, like a child.

Dmitri of Zante had been a sailor. He went in a big ship to Constantinople when Greece made peace with Turkey. That had been the big event in his life, before the bigger

event happened, the biggest he would ever know, the day he entered the Convent. Had he once been something of a spark, I asked myself, as sailors are? Had he gone up and down the streets of Constantinople with a girl on each arm? And then suddenly had he had a vision and heard a voice, and walked on, staring straight ahead of him, leaving the two girls open-mouthed in the street? No, I said to myself. It did not happen that way. He was a sailor, like other Greek boys, because he had to be. He became a monk because he wanted to be, from the moment he could babble his first prayer.

Having said what he had to say, Dmitri of Cairo hustled off, he was very busy; it was some sort of special day for the Beduin, and he had to work out a special ration of maize for them. Then the other Dmitri ushered me into his cell. There was only one chair in it, and that was occupied by his cat, Leon, predominantly a tortoise-shell. He asked Leon would he please let the stranger sit down. Leon said no. He asked again. Quite a little argument followed; but Leon would not move. So Dmitri brought the other chair in, and put a chip of wood under one of the legs to make it safe, and then put a cloth over it for ceremony, and then I sat down. It was a small arched room, with two or three old bits of stair-carpet on the floor, and an iron bedstead with one blanket facing the door, and a great deal of decoration on the walls. The most interesting feature of it was a series of frames painted in fresco, very floral and complicated. The frames had been painted to hold the photographs of several worthies, King George of Greece, King George of England and the Archbishop, Porphyrios. There were black and white printed eikons hand-painted with water-colours. The hand, I learned, was the hand of an old monk, Pachomios, by name. I learned with a thrill of excitement that Pachomios spent most of his time painting eikons; that he was in his cell at that moment painting eikons: he painted floral frames for the photographs of the novices, but his own art was an austerer one. Dmitri saw how the news interested me

and said should we go and see Pachomios at once. No, I said, please let me see your things first. He took me the round of his sacred and profane images, and then with special pride pointed out, on the wall over the bed, an enormous railway poster, picturing the amenities of Morecambe Bay, and requesting Dmitri to "Come to England." We both examined the poster silently for some time, then I made him aware I was in Mount Sinai again. He was anxious to offer me some hospitality, and after pondering the question deeply, he at last insisted on stuffing my pockets with incense. Then he hunted round in his cupboard, and triumphantly produced an orange, following it up with a plate and a knife. I cannot recall that any more profuse hospitality has ever made me so happy. I pointed to the poster of Morecambe Bay. "When you come to England," I said, "I will give you oranges, too, though we do not grow our own."

He smiled. He did not think he would come to England. "I am trying to grow a lemon-tree, too," he said, "but it does not do well." So we went out to inspect the lemon-tree in the garden. The garden was a raised platform in front of his cell, all farmed out in petrol tins. He said he had had a garden when he was a boy in Zante, as if he felt it necessary to make excuses for it. In one tin was his sprig of lemon, in others were herbs he called viola, and basilicos, and mismis. But most of the plants were dying or dead in their tins. I looked round on the squatting cats. It did not seem to me there was much hope for mismis or basilicos, while those unpleasant creatures ruled the roost.

Dmitri's cat, Leon, had taken no notice of me at all, so, to make up for the courtesy, Dmitri presented me to a number of Leon's colleagues. On a low wall Kathiza and Pouthiza faced each other. They were twin tom tabbies, with superior faces. This one was Sabakha, a piebald creature, with a squint. She was called after a Beduin princess. Then he pointed out a dingy blacky-gray cat named after a more illustrious sovereign. She was descending a wooden stairway

from a first-storey cell. "Look!" he said. "Cleopatra! The cat of Pachomios!" Cleopatra and I already knew each other. I had thrown a shoe at her at least twice. She had stolen from our stores the lovely lump of salami I had been saving up so carefully. Cleopatra stared at me for one moment as if I were not even a sardine-tin, and continued her progress down the stairs.

"This way!" Dmitri motioned me. I climbed up the stairway after him. I was again conscious of a thrill of acute excitement. I was entering the cell of an eikon-painter in the Convent of Mount Sinai. He had been practising his craft for half a century or more, in one of the earliest, one of the greatest, one of the last, shrines of Byzantine art. None was more inaccessible, in none was the tradition more unbroken. What revelation was in store for me, of what sublimely obstinate painter, painting in the twentieth century as his predecessors had painted in the tenth, painting saints rigid as rocks against what backgrounds of sullen gold!

I attained the threshold of the room. I saw an old monk bent over a table with his spectacles pushed up against his forehead, a thin large folio volume before him, and a water-colour brush poised delicately in his right hand. I knew at once, before the objects in the room had emerged from the half-darkness that shrouded them, that I had not found my way into Byzantium, but into Cheltenham. At the moment, he was filling with pink paint the minims and semibreves in an early missal. The proceeding seemed to give him some sort of ghostly pleasure. There were a number of little pieces of rug on the floor. The place was littered with what-not tables, as it would be impossible not to call them. The tables were ranged over with shells disposed in patterns, and beads and bits of coloured glass, and crucifixes and rosaries, and drops from chandeliers. Three blue glass witch-balls hung from a painted lozenge in the ceiling. The walls were completely plastered over with eikons, some being glossy

colour-prints, very harsh and primary, the rest being water-colour eikons painted by himself, pale blue and pale pink and pale yellow, like the spare-time work of a devout maiden lady in charge of a mission club for girls. But here again, amid all that chromolithographic and hand-painted piety, was one picture out of another world, stranger even than Dmitri's "Come to England" poster. It was a war-time supplement in photogravure to one of the illustrated weeklies, a team of British Tommies dragging a gun through shell-pocked barbed-wire-littered desolation. It was shocking, amid all those beads and shells and saints. I cannot work out how it got there, why old Pachomios put it up amid his spinster sanctities.

The old man himself was not merely charming, but learned. He knew a great deal about Byzantine eikons, their styles and periods, and the individual masters. He had great taste until the moment he took a brush in his hand, and then he became a roaring danger. I do not mean it was dangerous that he painted little eikons for himself and the other monks to put up on their walls; nor that some of his more ambitious works were hung in one of the chapels among sublime panels a thousand years old. They would come down sooner or later, and no-one would know any more about them.

The danger was that he had the job of restoring the old panels, and adapting them to his more civilized notions of what an eikon ought to be. He took me along to the chapel of St. John the Baptist, which is so inaccessible in this unfrequented part of the building, no-one would know it was there. Lamps were burning before the altar, so I took it worship still went on there. But it seemed to be less a chapel than a studio. It smelled of paint and brushes and varnished panels. Pachomios had let himself go. He showed me some of his restorations and my heart bled. It was terrible to think of those grand pictures enduring all the centuries, to come at last to so melancholy an end. He showed me his own work, too. But I suppose there are few living painters, and not

many dead ones, who could stand up to that competition. He did not.

Perhaps I am doing the Convent authorities an injustice. It may be that he is only allowed his head in this invisible chapel. Certainly I saw no traces of his handiwork in the eikons in the library or the basilica. Perhaps they feel it would be an unchristian thing to thwart him now, now he is so old and sick. "So cold here," he said, and shivered. "So quiet. I am so ill." The chill of death was already in his face. You could already almost see his skull piled up with the other skulls in the crypt down in the garden.

Yet when Dmitri brushed his sleeve against a wet panel, the old man showed a sudden sharp vitality. His eyes glinted. He chattered like an angry schoolmistress. Then he stopped, like a tap turned off. Dmitri said nothing. But I saw that a spot of colour burned in his cheeks. I moved away, into a corner of the Chapel I had not been in.

And then I was suddenly aware I had returned to Moses again. I had asked if there were other eikons of Moses in the Convent, besides those I had seen, and had been told there were none. This one had been forgotten, and it was one of the loveliest. Pachomios had fortunately not laid a finger on it. It was an eikon of the school of Crete, the old man told me. The Prophet holds the stone tables in his hand, but instead of being graven with the Decalogue they bear an image of the Madonna and Child. Beside the Prophet stands a ewer, the significance of which the monks could not explain. I thought it might be part of the furniture for the table of Showbread in the Tabernacle. He wears a green tunic, caught at the throat by a ruby, a gold-braided green shirt beneath, and gold sandals. He has a beard, which is unusual, a small brown beard. Aaron is represented in the neighbouring eikon. His beard is small and white. He wears a sort of red biretta and a red jacket under a white cloak. The rod in his hand blossoms into a triple lily.

I was happy to have found my way back to Moses again. But I was less excited about Aaron.

§ 4

Dmitri of Cairo, as I said earlier, was a busy person. If you heard a swift shuffle of feet and jingle-jangle of keys round a corner you knew it was Dmitri. He was chiefly occupied with the Beduin and their bread rations, but he seemed to have a lot of other things to do. He never seemed to be in his cell, except, doubtless, to sleep in it; so I concluded he had no cat, no canary, no lemon-tree in a petrol-tin. I realized after two or three days he, too, had his relaxation. It was the ossuary in the garden, a somewhat grisly institution, it seemed to me, though Dmitri was curiously at ease there.

The ossuary is a small whitewashed building entered through a deeply-recessed doorway. The part of the building above ground might be one century old or five, it is square and featureless. The crypt below, which is divided into two chambers, undoubtedly goes back a good many centuries.

We paused a moment in front of the ossuary. "When we die," said Dmitri, "we are buried here." He pointed out the ground under our feet. "Here." I almost felt my soles twitch and the earth heave under them. His voice was oddly flat and inexpressive, as if he were talking of the sepulture of roots against next year's replanting. But the thick lenses of his glasses glittered a little sharply, perhaps a little insanely. "Then a few years later, when the flesh is consumed, they take up our skeletons and break them up, here, in the threshold." It was as if he were talking of the breaking-up of firewood. "This way," he signalled us. We followed him. A few sad-eyed Beduin boys hung round the threshold, making low blind noises like stonechats.

We descended a few stairs. Enough daylight came down with us for us to see by, but he lit a lamp, too. He wished us

to see well. The first thing we saw was Stephen the door-keeper, less a skeleton than a mummy. He sits in a chair behind the door, looking rather schoolmasterish with his white gown and purple velvet biretta. His chin rests in one hand. A staff reposes in the other. We went further. It was all very orderly within, the school presided over by schoolmaster Stephen. The bones were all divided up into categories, skulls, leg-bones, thigh-bones, ribs and the rest. Some were spread out on shelves like apples drying in an attic, some were heaped in tidy pyramids, some were stacked in baskets. A great many of the bones have been collected from scattered graves of hermits throughout the mountains, but Dmitri seemed anxious to impress on us their presentness, their pertinence. "The bones of the novices and lay brothers are placed there, in the inner room. The seniors are placed here. They store the bones of the archbishops in those cupboards in the walls." He went up to a skull standing by itself on a shelf, and passed the palm of his hand over its smooth upper surface. "I have heard many tales of this one. The older monks knew him well. His name was Constantinos. He would fast for weeks at a time, and be stronger after his fast than before." He went about from bone to bone, fingering them delicately like a connoisseur showing the Ming pieces in his cupboard. On another shelf was a tibia, I think it was. "A saint," he said. "You see, do you not? A saint! What else?" We saw a faint oily ooze exuding from the mid-section of the bone; the rest of it was oven-dry. There was a note of quiet and triumphant certainty in his voice, like some-one who concludes a mathematical argument with a thunderbolt of proof. He went up to another heap against the wall, less tidy than the others, with a number of lean hands clawing their way through a litter of joint-bones. He passed his fingers lightly across them like a player running his finger down the keyboard of a piano. "It is calm here," he said, "no?"

We thought it was calm.

"Sometimes visitors come and do not go," he remarked. "They are buried out there, then they are taken up again. These are the bones of visitors, in these reed baskets."

"They are not lonely."

"No, they are not lonely here."

He hung about, as if he were reluctant to go. He showed us more bones, and told us more tales.

"I think perhaps——" I said at length.

"Yes, perhaps——" the other two murmured uneasily.

He did not hear us. His eye and mind was on a skull he had brought up to within a few inches of his spectacles.

"I think perhaps——" I said more loudly.

He started. "What? Oh yes, yes! We will go now." He put the skull down, and bade us go before him. He came up after us, the keys jangling sharply at his girdle.

The ossuary was Dmitri's garden. He tended his flowers there devotedly. I saw him enter or leave the place three times during the next day or two after he had shown it us. It may be that it was one of his duties.

On my way from the monks' close to the rest-house, that evening I spent with Dmitri of Zante and Pachomios, I met him again near the granary. He was bustling by with his usual speed, but on seeing me, he stopped. He stared at me intently for a moment. Then he said: "I am going to the crypt. There are things you have not seen there."

"No," I said. And then more urgently. "No!"

"No?" he asked.

"I would like to go to the Holy Mountain," I cried suddenly, "high up there, away from the bones."

"But yes," he said, and shrugged his shoulders. "When would you like to go?"

"Now! If it were possible!"

"It is too late now!"

"We could find our way ourselves. The nights are clear."

“Alas! Not possible!”

“To-morrow?”

“To-morrow.”

It was arranged we should set off to climb the Holy Mountain early next morning.

Some half-hour later I wandered down to the basilica, for I thought I would go and look at the mosaic again; but finding that a service was in progress, I hung about undecided for some moments, then turned to go. Then I saw above me the monk, Cyrillos, who loved birds and donkeys. He had noted my awkwardness. “Come!” he smiled. I have rarely seen a man smile more winningly. I followed him into the incense-heavy gloom.

Most of the other novices were there already. They were standing modestly away from the altar, in the rear parts of the basilica, behind the choir-stalls that run the length of the nave. The new-comer walked a few steps so that he might bow to the altar, then withdrew again behind a pillar. High up towards the altar, the Father Superior sat in a high chair, on the right hand of the Archbishop’s empty throne. Beside him on a lower chair, sat the *oikonomos*. Close at hand sat Dmitri of Cairo, his thick shell glasses spectrally reflecting the taper lights.

As I entered, the community was intoning a litany of saints and martyrs. As the names succeeded each other, the Sacristan, who was officiating, a long saffron-coloured stole hanging from his shoulders, lit candle after candle before image after image, bowing to this one and the next one as he moved. A glowing breath misted the copper gold and the bronze gold. After some time, the litany ceased for a time. The Father Superior chanted an office, with one young novice to be his echo; “*Kyrie Eleison! Kyrie Eleison!*” repeated again and again, endlessly repeated, the words floating like wings up into the roof until all the upper air was thick with them. Then the office came to an end, and the Father Superior held out his hand, and the young man

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bowed low and kissed it. Then the litany was resumed again, and the Sacristan, who had been busy with incense at a serving-table, came down the aisle and swung his censer before the Father Superior and the *oikonomos*, and bowed to them and they to him. And noticing me in a pew where I sat close toward the western wall, he came down towards me and swung his censer and bowed, and I bowed again. I felt at once proud and humble that they had involved me for one brief moment as I passed, in the links of their heavy gold chain that extended from the wrist of the Emperor Justinian and would extend as far as . . . as far as . . .

I looked up towards the eikon of Moses on the south wall, with the Bush flaming behind him and the sky all gold. His face was rigid and foreign. "Will you be less unfamiliar and far to-morrow on the Mountain?" my heart asked. "You are a lot further away up there, amid your gold and scarlet, than you were in the kitchen in Doomington, long years ago, when my father traced your journey to the Holy Mountain on a chart framed in maple-wood on the dark wall."

Next day the Holy Mountain. Next day the Holy Mountain. I did not sleep well that night, thinking of it. Was it wise to go? Was it wise?

How foolish it would be not to go! How foolish!

Have you not heard it said certain pictures should remain unseen, certain pieces of music remain unheard, certain of the greatest pictures and greatest pieces of music? So that you are aware in your last moment Life has something supreme untasted, you do not cast it behind you like an old shoe, but hand it over, a gift still worth giving?

What foolishness. How can you decide which pictures and pieces of music are worthy of thus not being seen and heard, until you have seen and heard them?

To-morrow the Mountain!

§ 5

But we did not, in fact, ascend the Mountain till two days later, though we set out early next morning, as arranged, with Dmitri showing us the way and one of the Convent slaves to carry our things. The air was magnificently cool and clear, and I was keyed to a pitch of solemn expectancy. This was the climacteric day of our journey, the day in which we would seek to experience within the compass of a few hours the utmost our imaginations were capable of conceiving of the sublime events on Sinai.

But we had not travelled five minutes along the track rearward from the Convent, under the mountain, when my blackness descended on me. My blackness is an odd condition, of which I need say nothing more than that it is a sort of migraine, I suppose, which afflicts me from time to time, for about twelve hours at a stretch. Sometimes it visits me twice in six months, sometimes I am allowed to forget it for two years or more. But when it comes, there is no parleying with it. The first blackness lasts about two or three minutes. Then, if I lie down in a dark and quiet room, it recurs irregularly and diminishingly, till, twelve hours later, it is gone. I am none the worse for it. I am exactly as I was before it came down on me.

But I must lie down in a dark and quiet room. There is no help for that, whatever I am doing, even if I am about to climb Mount Sinai.

I sat down on a stone, my hand before my eyes. Lucas knew the symptoms. He waited till the first two minutes were over.

“Is it that thing?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’ll have to go back.”

“Of course. It’s tough. Take your time.”

“I’ll be all right. You two had better keep going. I’ll go back with old Saleh. He’ll catch you up in a minute or two.”

"Don't you believe it. We go up Gebel Musa together. Take things easy."

"It's very queer," I said, "this blackness coming down on me, at the very foot of the Mountain. Like a warning."

"Stomach-ache," said Lucas bluntly.

"What's the matter?" asked Dmitri.

Lucas explained. Dmitri was very kind. "Well, tomorrow," he said, "or next day." Next day or next year was all the same to him. He had time enough. We returned to the Convent and I was deposited on my bed and the curtains drawn.

"What are you two going to do?" I asked a little faintly. "You know how I feel about it."

"Do?" asked Lucas. "Stay here, of course."

"Please!" I insisted. "It's the only thing I don't want! I don't want to be looked after! So long as I have something to drink. . . . Just ask Mustapha to give me a drink every couple of hours. Nobody else."

"All right."

"Go somewhere, both of you. I'll be all right."

Lucas pondered a moment. "All right," he said. "We'll go somewhere. At least I will. I'd like to do a mountain to-day. I'll go and climb Gebel Katrin."

"What?" asked Jim. "Is that the Mountain of Saint Catherine? Is that the one with a telescope on? I'm coming, too."

"But you can't," I protested. "It's really a rough proposition. It's higher than Sinai and it's the wrong season of the year. It'll be all ice and snow up there."

"You want to be left alone, don't you?" asked Lucas.

"Yes."

"Well, we can't worry you from the top of Catherine."

"Catherine . . ." repeated Jim, with a sort of huskiness in his voice. He is not a Catholic, so it was not a matter of piety. I thought perhaps, his mother, or a baby sister who had died young . . . I did not press the matter.

" You'd need alpenstocks and hob-nailed boots for a climb like that," I objected feebly.

" I always climb mountains in sandals," said Lucas.

" My shoes will do," said Jim.

" You'll take Dmitri, of course."

" Don't you believe it. We are going hunting for fossils and things. Just round Safsafch, you know. And then we'll get lost, and before we know where we are, we'll be half-way up Gebel Katrin."

" Very well. When do you think you'll get back?"

" Oh, before sunset. I'll arrange with Mustapha to come and meet us in the Wadi Ledja."

" Mustapha?" I said. I felt an acute twinge of conscience, preoccupied as I was with my own condition. " Poor Mustapha."

" Yes, poor Mustapha!"

" And poor Hassan! And poor Mohammed!"

" They have been bored, poor chaps! It's dreadful the way we've lost sight of them!"

We both realized how very unhappy they had been, here in the Convent. Their faces had got quite pinched with the cold. They were, after all, Sudanese. They had never quite made up their minds what to do with themselves and where they belonged to. They couldn't have anything to do with the Beduin, that would be an awful come-down. And they never got the hang of the monks, either. Those old fellows could subject themselves to a discipline more rigid even than the Camel Corps on parade . . . and yet . . . with the best will in the world you couldn't call them spick and span.

" It'll be fine for them to have something to do," I said.

" We can't take both cars out for a journey of a mile or two, can we?"

" Perhaps not. All right. You'll have Mustapha. The others will stand by. I'll come along with him. I'll be all right by then."

" Are you sure? Is there anything we can do?"

I turned on my side. "Just don't break your ankles," I said. "It would be awkward."

The blackness had gone completely by the late afternoon, as it had often done before, after twelve hours or less. The fact that by five o'clock I felt as fit as at any time during the journey made me feel rather angry. I had wasted a day, and we had very few days left now at the Convent. If anything had happened to anybody's ankles up on those ice-slopes, I had wasted more than a day. I should not have let them go off into the blue like that, I told myself crossly. There was some building on the top there, the monks had been saying, some sort of an observatory; but apparently nobody went there more than once in three months, so there could not be much of a track leading up to it. Perhaps there was no track at all at this season of the year.

I asked Mustapha to drive as far up the Wadi Ledja as the car could go.

"I hope they'll be *quais*," I murmured moodily.

"*Quais*, Mista Goddun! *Kolo quais!*" Mustapha assured me.

And they were, they were as *quais* as anyone could possibly be, boisterously *quais*. We met them sauntering down the wadi as if they'd just been to buy a stamp at the village post office.

"Hallo!" they hallooed, when they sighted us. "Are you all right?"

"Mista Goddun *quais!*" Mustapha shouted, to save me the trouble.

"I could knock a house down!" I roared. "And you?"

They had had the best day in their lives. The climb had been as uncomfortable as Lucas could hope for in his wildest dreams, the apotheosis of discomfort. It had been all jagged rock below, and all snow above. The snow was several feet deep in places, so that they often sank to their waists. In the shadow the snow was as hard as ice on the surface, so they

FOOTPRINT OF MOHAMMED'S CAMEL



slid about a good deal, till the surface broke and they went down. Lucas's sandals had worn through quite early. His feet were torn to ribbons. He had had a grand time.

"And the view from the top! You can't begin to imagine what the view was like! Half Africa on the West, and on the East Akaba and the Persian Gulf and the mountains of Arabia! On the North——"

"Stop!" I cried. "That's not fair!"

"I'm sorry!" he said contritely.

"The view wasn't half so good as the orange she gave us," said Jim. "Oh, it *was* good, that orange! My lips were like coke!"

"Who gave you?"

"In the observatory! Mrs. More! The wife of Mr. More!"

They told me about Mr. and Mrs. More, and their assistant, and their observatory, and their house, there at the end of the world, at the top of the wilderness. It was a tale curiously combined of Middle Western prose and the wildest Copernican poetry. Mr. Alfred M. More is an astronomer sent out by the Smithsonian Institute of America, to conduct certain extremely delicate researches in solar periodicity. He had come to Sinai, to the top of Gebel Katrin, because the conditions are as nearly perfect as he is likely to find them. The air further north is too misty, further south towards the equator, too much charged with electricity. He is remote enough to conduct his researches without fear of interruption; he is not too remote from civilization in case of emergency.

If I translate Lucas, and he translates Mr. More, correctly, the problem he is at work on concerns the fixed quanta of heat which, it is believed, are sent out by the sun in regular cycles of twenty-three years. His researches may have the practical result that it will be possible to fix the variations of weather for years ahead, in which case we are assured of the most important revolution in the history of farming since the invention of chemical manures.

The observatory has granite walls a metre thick, limed with special plasters, and painted on the interior with a light-absorbing silver paint. It contains a thermometer, for which Mr. More has a more imposing name, that registers the sun's heat to a millionth of a degree. On a rocky platform outside the observatory stands another instrument, whose principal components are two large round mirrors, on which no moisture can condense, if there is any there. By adjusting the mirrors, the sunlight is reflected through a narrow slit into the observatory, where it is at length broken up by a spectroscope into thirty-five separate colours, the density of which is recorded on a special colour-camera.

A ray of sunlight striking through a narrow aperture! There was something familiar in the sound of that. Oh yes, I remembered. The ray of light that once a year strikes from the top of Gebel ed Deir through a narrow window into the Chapel of the Burning Bush! I pointed that out to Lucas. He said, with a shade of bitterness, I thought: "There's nothing new under the sun, is there?"

I assured him I had no words to say how impressed I was by this witchcraft of the mountain-top wizards, the patient meditations of these newer hermits of Sinai, who exiled themselves in that remote solitude, not with any thought of assuring themselves the kingdom of heaven, but merely that the farmers of Wisconsin and Leicestershire might know in what years there would be rain, in what years drought.

"But the house they live in," said Lucas. "It's not a bit like those old hermitages in Pharan. Is it, Jim?"

It seemed it was not. It was a staggering house, up there in the belly of the stars. It had every home-comfort, though that is grossly to exaggerate the comfort of most homes. They had their own electric dynamo and wireless and refrigerator, the most flawless plumbing, the most ingenious stoves for cooking and heating. If St. Catherine has any house-sense, she must be extremely proud of the place, said Lucas. Mrs. More took it all very much for granted. She said:

‘You’ll stay to lunch, of course,’ as if we’d left the old Ford ticking over just below the porch.

“She lifted up a trap-door in the floor,” said Jim. “You should have seen the stores she had there.”

“It all comes up from Tor on camel-back,” said Lucas. “Tell him about that lunch.”

“Ah, that lunch,” mused Jim dreamily. He spoke like a poet making a poem, or a young man in love. “Chicken and bread sauce. What bread! She makes her own. Like snow. Creamed potatoes all mashed up with cream and butter.” He stopped and sighed. “Brussel sprouts. Green salad with apples and raisins. Chocolate iced cake. Pie. What was the name of that pie?”

“Pumpkin pie.”

“Pumpkin pie. Almonds and pea-nuts. Coffee.”

There was a silence. Then I ventured to speak again. “What was the young man like? What was he doing there?”

“A college boy,” said Lucas. “He helps with the calculations. You know. A college streamer tacked up on the wall. A freshman group. A sophomore group. A large hand-tinted photograph of the girl. Several issues of *College Humor*. A big pink stuffed doll on his bed. She must have given it him after the last dance they went to. Aching to get on to the wireless all the time. The Pope was speaking. Then the old man came through. Very odd, the old man’s voice talking on the top of Sinai. Then he got a dance-band from somewhere.”

“Yes,” I said. “The instruments are staggering. The house is staggering. The lunch was staggering. But that College Boy shutting himself up there with those old people for months and months on end, on that mountain-top, with only the stars to talk to, when he feels he’d like a bit of a change . . . I think that hits the bell,” I finished lamely. “It’s getting dark. We’d better get into the car, or we’ll find the doors locked on us.”

Mohammed and Hassan were waiting for us outside the Convent gate anxiously. They were just about to set out in search of us. They found it very *quais* indeed that nothing had happened to any of us. "Take!" I thought I heard Mohammed say. He handed something over to Jim, who seemed to hesitate; but Mohammed insisted. He uttered another word or two I did not catch. Jim's hand closed over the object, whatever it was.

"What's that, Jim?" I asked idly.

"Nothing," he said.

I did not press the matter. If Mohammed adored Jim like the super-totem of his tribe and wanted him to accept tokens of his adoration, it was not my affair.

We threaded our way through the daedal labyrinth of the Convent. I led the way up the staircase and along the veranda outside the visitors' room. It was for that reason I saw the apparition first.

But I refused to credit it. It was not there. I was seeing things. You begin to see things in the desert sooner or later, and that applies even more to a sixth-century convent in the middle of the desert. Or perhaps it was a hang-over from my blackness. I looked round to the others to see if they had seen anything. Judging from their faces they had.

"*Bon soir*," the apparition said. It was a girl, a dark girl, a very beautiful girl. But it was not her beauty, or not only her beauty that made you think you were seeing things. It was her beach pyjamas. She was wearing beach pyjamas! In the Convent of Mount Sinai! A girl! And wearing beach pyjamas! She had a trim little figure in her pale-blue polo sweater. The pyjamas were dark-blue.

"*Bon soir*," I replied. Or I think I replied. Then the girl turned round again and went back into her room.

I turned to Lucas. "She *was* there?" I asked earnestly. "We're not being tempted? You know, like St. Anthony in the desert? Fiends and hobgoblins?"

"I think she *was* there," said Lucas cautiously.

"Oh, oh, oh," said Jim incoherently. He ran over into his room and poured water into his basin and started scraping dirt and sweat off his face.

"Have you any hair-oil left, either of you?" he cried out, some minutes later. "I can't make it stick down with water!" he wailed. Then suddenly he felt in his pocket. "I know now!" he whooped triumphantly. He brought the turquoise ring out of his pocket and fitted it on to his finger. "I thought I heard Mohammed say *bint*, but I wasn't sure. But he was right! *Bint!*" he repeated joyously. "*Bint!*" (*Bint* means girl.) "He wanted me to look well for the *bint!*"

At that moment I noticed a tall young man emerge from a room farther down the veranda. He seemed a powerful young man.

"Go easy with that ring!" I said.

So it was we came upon Romance in Sinai. We met the young man and the young woman at supper in the little dining-room. We joined forces after a time. They were very charming people. They had some of our brandy, we had some of their Châteauneuf du Pape, which had had a bit of a jolting in the desert that day, but was still very good. We had some of their smoked reindeer, I think they said it was, though I had to go carefully. They had our tinned chops. I always knew we could easily have done with some more of those tinned chops.

He was an Italian cotton merchant from Alexandria, she a girl from Athens, both people of family. They were getting married next day! Or, at least, as soon as they could get a copy of the marriage-service over from the monks at Tor. We did not learn what impulse had led them to celebrate their wedding in the Sinai Convent. Perhaps an ancestor of one or both had left their escutcheons graven in the walls of the refectory five centuries ago. Perhaps it was only a sense of poetry or drama. Perhaps the bride had realized that there could be no sublimer background in all the world

for her white satin nuptial gown than the jewelled gloom of the basilica and the saffron-tawny mountains. They had obtained permission from his Eminence the Archbishop in Cairo, and he had telegraphed instructions to the Father Superior here in Sinai that the young people were to be married in his Convent, according to the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church. They had arrived shortly after I had set out to meet my friends in the Wadi Ledja, and had found the monks in a state of the direst perturbation. It seemed that no-one had ever been married before in the Convent in all its tremendous history. As far as anyone knew, the last nuptials to be celebrated here were the nuptials of Moses and Zipporah. At all events, there was no copy of the marriage service on hand. So they had sent a Bedu post-haste down the passes to Tor. They would have to wait three, or even four days, for things were all upside down at Tor owing to the Mecca pilgrimage.

"We weren't expecting any wedding-guests," the bridegroom said. "But if you cared to be present, I needn't tell you how delighted we'd be."

"Grand!" exclaimed Jim.

"It would be grand!" I endorsed. "I can't conceive anything we'd like more. But—" Jim's face fell several inches—"but I'm afraid . . . I've been working it out . . . we must leave the day after to-morrow . . . after we climb Gebel Musa."

"I'm sorry, awfully sorry," he said.

"Us, too," said Jim.

"We'll send each other photographs," the bride smiled at us.

"Is this the end of your journey?" asked the bridegroom. "Are you going back home?"

"Yes, in a sense, I am going home."

"To London?"

"Not for some time."

"So it isn't the end of your journey?"

"Darling!" protested the bride. "All these questions!"

“Please!” we assured her. “It’s the end of *one* journey,” I pointed out. “At least, it will be to-morrow, when we’ve climbed Gebel Musa. These people have already done Gebel Katrin to-day, but they say they could tackle Gebel Everest after supper, if it were round this way!”

“How strong!” the bride murmured. Jim went poppy-red.

“The end of one journey,” I repeated. “In the steps of Moses the Lawgiver. Then a few months later he sets out, and we catch up with him the day after to-morrow.”

“I think I see,” said the bridegroom.

“He sets out to a land beyond a river. He meets a lot of odd people, Canaanites and Hittites and Peruzzites and Jebusites! We’re almost certain to meet them, too, up in Transjordan, beyond Akaba. But he gets there. Or very nearly. Moses the Conqueror.”

The bridegroom rose, and the bride rose with him. “We wish good luck to the journey you’ve made, and the journey you’re about to make.”

We remained seated while they drank. Then we rose and they sat down. “We wish good luck to the first marriage on Mount Sinai since the marriage of Moses and Zipporah.”

It was a delightful party, all the more as it was so completely unexpected by all of us there, all five of us. But quite early in the festivities I noticed Jim take the turquoise ring off his finger and slip it unobtrusively into his pocket.

§ 6

No blackness came down on me next morning as we set out for a second time to make the ascent of Gebel Musa. Jim and Lucas, too, were in good form. It was as if they had climbed Highgate Hill, the day before, not a tough icy mountain. Again we had Dmitri with us, and one of the Convent Salehs. We walked under the cliffs for some ten minutes, and saw a family of Beduin cresting the rise, as if

bidding us remember that this was not the Mountain of the Hebrews and the Christians only, but the Muslims, too, had their rights there. On our right hand the cliff withdrew; a narrow gorge split it from crown to heel; its rear wall was carved into five hundred stairs. We turned in and the ascent began. Our feet were on the first of the three thousand stairs, or seven thousand, no-one seems to know now, but they are less than they used to be, for time and torrent have prised some away and flattened others, since the monks carved them. It was very cold in the shade of the stairway, very hot as we wound round and up into open sunlight again. Sometimes there was wind, sometimes there was not. It was necessary to play a perpetual game of putting on and taking off sweaters. There was always a smell of water. In the lower levels it was the water of springs, with greenery in the overhanging caves or in the crannies of the rock. In the higher levels it was the water of unmelted snow. But water was there all the time, and the fine smell of aromatic herbs, caper and thyme and hyssop, and several others of which it is said they only grow on these slopes.

In less than half an hour we came on a spring welling fresh and clear from a grotto under two vast rocks, with a stone seat carved out beside it; and Dmitri sat down and told us holy tales. He sat down frequently during the ascent, whenever there was a site of some interest, and told us holy tales. I do not know if he sat down because he was tired, and covered up his fatigue that way. Or whether it was part of his official duty to increase the knowledge and improve the souls of pilgrims. Or whether he did it in a holiday spirit, because he was having a day's respite from his perpetual loafing, and to tell holy tales was the natural expression of his sense of well-being, as others make jokes or sing songs. It may have been a relief to get away from his bones, too. At all events, I can see now that it was largely due to Dmitri's tale-telling that I felt all that day, despite the magnificence of the Mountain and the incomparable view from its summit,

that I was not really on the Mountain but on the roof of a tower in the Convent walls. I found substance, alas, to the shadows that had haunted me the night before.

The Prophet has come forth from the Tent of Meeting (I said to myself wanly). The slaying is over. The three thousand idolaters are stifled under thick blankets of sand, and the women have placed stones at their head and feet. The Prophet has come to the Mountain again, full of misgiving. Will the Lord even a second time vouchsafe to this people the ineffable goodness of His Commandments? Again and again he hesitates, and still again toils forward and upward . . . somewhere on this Mountain . . . somewhere . . .

But it was not tales of Moses that the monk, Dmitri, told us. And we listened duly, and drank duly, at the fountain there, and continued the climb. Before long we came to the first snow lying in the gullies. There were footsteps in the snow, and I asked Dmitri if anyone had been up the Mountain yesterday. They were his own footsteps, he said, and he had not been up the mountain for sixteen days.

He turned and bade us look at his Convent, with a rather touching pride, as if he himself had placed it there. And indeed, we had never seen it more majestic, with its golden bastions and buttresses and the flaming roof of the red-tiled guest-house perched on the battlements. The sun glanced on the blue-painted galvanized iron of the basilica roof so that it shone like a panel of Galilee.

Soon came the Chapel of the Virgin, regarding which Dmitri told us an old tale. (Several of his tales we had not read or heard, but we were familiar with this one.) In a time of famine, the monks were about to abandon this Chapel, in which they had said Mass for centuries; they could not even get supplies of oil for their altar-lamps. But no sooner had they left the Chapel, than the Virgin appeared and requested them to turn again, for never again would oil, at least, be lacking. He told us a second version of the same

tale: how once the place became infested with every manner of scorpions and spiders and serpents. Despite their piety, the monks could bear it no more. They set out on the descent. The Virgin appeared. She promised an immediate and radical extirpation of the pests. Neither scorpion, nor spider, nor serpent, has been seen on the Chapel, or indeed on the Mountain, from that day to this.

Though indeed, said Dmitri, if a scorpion should appear here, it would be a good thing to catch it and put it in a jar of holy oil, that is to say oil drawn from one of the altar-lamps. For I can myself testify that that oil will cure the bite of any other scorpion; for twelve months, that is. It loses its virtue after that time. I saw with my own eyes a monk of forty cured that way.

Is it worse for monks when they are forty? I asked.

Everything is worse when one is forty, he said. (Dmitri is not more than two or three and twenty.)

We continued. A stream came down the gully towards us, in and out among gigantic boulders. Beyond the gully, the most imposing section of the stairway rises, like the ladder of Jacob's dream. It is spanned on the skyline by an archway thrown between the cliffs. It was here the monk Stephen took up his place to hear confessions, said Dmitri, for no pilgrim could go higher if he were not in a state of grace. The books are wrong, he said sternly. He was not a saint. He was only a beatific. You remember him at the entrance into the crypt? We remembered him. It is also said of Stephen, Dmitri continued, that he deemed it an especial grace, when Jews sought to reach the mountain-top where their great Prophet had received the Law, to baptize them without more ado in the stream below the stairway, so that they might be in the state to continue their journey. If they contumaciously refused baptism, they were turned back.

The legend is interesting, I thought, because it implies that Mount Sinai was at one time a place of pilgrimage for Jews, though they can hardly have been encouraged by

Stephen's treatment when they got there. Something of that sort may be the reason why the eleventh-century Spanish Jewish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela, gives a description of Sinai so vague and inaccurate that it is obvious he never actually visited it, though he certainly travelled in the neighbourhood. The discouragement of Jews increased as time went on. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, a group of pilgrims record that access to the Mountain of Moses is totally forbidden them, but whether the monks or the Arabs imposed the veto is not clear. The Arabs certainly prohibit the visit of both Jews and Christians to Mount Hor, the traditional mountain of the death of Aaron, over against Petra. But neither the prohibition of Sinai nor of Hor seems to have troubled the Jews. As far as Sinai is concerned, they were aware not only that the Christian pilgrims, but the monks themselves, often had great difficulties on the Mountain, despite the protective *firman* of Mohammed. Mount Hor, they felt, has not very serious authority as the place of the death of Aaron. The focus of Jewish pilgrimage has been elsewhere, to the towers and fields of Zion, whither Sinai itself was but a stage on a journey.

The ascent continued. I might almost say we got into the carriage again and were pulled up the next stage of the monkish funicular. Do I give the impression the climb as a climb was trivial? I do not mean that, though we found it easier than the Lady Etheria did, who, in one of the earliest extant descriptions of the ascent of Mount Sinai, records that "the labour was great, for I had to ascend on foot because the ascent could not be made in a chair." Do I give the impression that the ascent was threaded with holy places, like beads on a string? That would be inaccurate. There were enormous intervening stretches of towering gulf and dizzy precipice with range upon range glimpsed beyond the bright blue vacancies. But I am trying to put down the truth of that day, and I know I have to make an effort to recall

the mountains that surrounded the Mountain, and to recall the Mountain itself. I did not feel Moses present in the scene of his supreme experience. I remember chiefly little Dmitri and the sun flashing on his opaque spectacles.

Now we came out upon a triangular plateau set in an arena of grey and red granite hills. At its centre was a tall cypress, a thousand years old, said Dmitri, and the ravens that fed Elijah the Tishbite perched in that tree. It did not seem an easy tree to perch in, I thought. Not far away was a large flat stone, on which the seventy elders of Israel stood together when they accompanied Moses as far as this place, and he left them, and looking up the way he went, they saw under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone. And that small square chapel under the cliff, said Dmitri, is built over the cave where Elijah hid from the wrath of Jezebel. There was a much worthier chapel once, but the pagans destroyed it; and he led me over to the fragment of a marble pillar under the cypress, to prove his words. It looked curiously delicate and civilized and lost, that fragment of marble among the planetary chunks of red granite. A rich spring rises on the plateau, the waters of which are conserved by a dam the monks have built. There were olives and aspens and cypresses in a garden, and many odorous bushes. His Eminence the present Archbishop has paid for the restoration of this garden, said Dmitri, and I felt very grateful to the old man. So many trees and no tale attached to them. Neither Aaron nor Elijah had used that mattock and spade against the shed, but only the old monk who climbs here once a week from the Convent of the Forty Martyrs on the other side of the Mountain. It was only that old monk who made coffee in that coffee-pot over a fire of twigs. There were mushrooms in his garden. It was only he who ate them. Legendary ravens had not carried them, and would not carry them, in their beaks.

The ascent continued. But the next monument was of another order than its predecessors. A small thing, a false

thing. Dmitri's lip curled as we approached it. He did not advance within twenty yards of it. He handed his duty as cicerone over to the Bedu, who took us to the magic imprint of Mohammed's camel, or Saleh's camel, as it is sometimes said to be. The Bedu placed his foot alongside of it, to show that the imprint was smaller than a human foot, which added to the marvel of it. For if it was the imprint of Mohammed's camel, it must have been on the occasion when the Archangel Gabriel raised Mohammed to heaven, and the four hooves of his camel were spread across all the earth, one at Sinai, another at Cairo, the third at Damascus, the fourth at Mecca.

We resumed the ascent. We were almost on the very summit. They will sometimes tell you, said Dmitri, that on a clear day it is possible from the top there to see all those places, Cairo and Damascus and Mecca. But it is not true, said Dmitri. It is not true at all. These people are very ignorant, they will believe anything. He stopped. It was some fifty yards from the summit. Have I told you about the monk from the monastery who wanted to go for communion to Jerusalem? You have not, I said unhappily. The two others had reached the top of the Mountain many minutes ago. A sudden dreadful doubt seized me. Would I ever reach the top of this Mountain? Was it the right Mountain, after all? He was very holy, said Dmitri. His name is Basil. He will be a saint some day. I will show you his bones in the crypt. The holy oil oozes from them the whole time. Do not believe them when they say the holy oil is no more than the sap oozing from the wood of coffins. It is not true. You have seen for yourself, have you not? Old Basil's bones are on a dry shelf. There are many bones near them, but they do not ooze oil. What happened to Basil, I asked, closing my eyes, to shut from my imagination the vistas that awaited them if, perhaps, I should after all conclude the ascent. As I was saying, said Dmitri, he wished to take communion with the Patriarch in Jerusalem. So he came up to that flat place below, near the camel's foot, as they call it, and an angel

came for him and carried him through the air to Jerusalem, and there he took communion with the Patriarch and had breakfast with him, and was back at his task in the Convent garden at noon, as if he had not been away at all.

We will go up now? I asked.

We will go up now, said Dmitri.

We went up. I was on the top of Mount Sinai. Everything had led up to it, everything would lead down and away from it. I looked round swiftly north, south, east and west. It was as magnificent as I hoped it would be, more magnificent. But something was missing, something was inadequate. It has taken me some time to work it out, if I have, in fact, succeeded. I was on the top of Mount Sinai. It was a topographical fact. Where else was I? Yet something was missing.

The top of the Mountain is a small flat plateau of grey granite, darker and more fateful in colour than the slopes. It has just room for two small buildings, one a chapel, dedicated to Moses, the other a mosque, which Moses shares with Saleh, though neither is very active in it. The slopes of the Mountain swoop sheer on every side. The present Chapel incorporates fragments from a building which goes back to the early centuries of the hermit settlements in the peninsula, the fourth or fifth, perhaps. In the sixth century it had already been reduced to its present meagre limits. A good deal has been done to it, so lately as 1934. The interior consists of the original apse and half the central nave and is whitewashed. The roof is varnished plain wood. There is a neo-Byzantine pulpit, with several painted panels representing certain stages of the Mosaic story. In one panel, a haloed Moses, in a red-and-gold tunic, is seen ascending the Mountain. In another, he receives the Decalogue, with a bright light shining from his face, according to the words of the text: "Behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come nigh him." In a third panel, Moses and Aaron are

seen together; Moses holds a sword, perhaps to represent the swords of the Levites with which the three thousand idolaters were cut down. Aaron holds a book and scroll. In the fourth panel, Moses, his face bright-red with anger, breaks the Tables at the sight of the Golden Calf.

Beyond the pulpit is a throne for the Archbishop, should he find his way to the top of Gebel Musa. The reredos is of American deal, with a fine fretted gateway let in it, and two panels picturing Gabriel and Michael. The chapel is dominated by a vast, blue, modern-Venetian-glass chandelier, presented by a pious Greek lady only last year. It was carried up piecemeal on the backs of the Gebelliyeh, which was a notable feat in the art of transportation. The absidal space behind the reredos was a sort of vestry. There were reserve candlesticks and lamps and eikons and the capital of one of the original pillars, used as a serving-table. But it was not only a vestry. It was the central point of the shrine, for below the south-east wall the living rock shoulders its way through to form part of the floor, and it is on that fragment of rock, the monks say, the Prophet stood to receive the tables of the Law from the Most High. There was a lamp hanging over it, suspended by a pulley. The flame had gone out, for the oil had congealed in the cold. So Dmitri pulled the lamp down, replenished the oil, and lit the wick again over the holy place. Outside the Chapel, below the south wall, is a fissure, making a narrow cave. That is the place where Moses hid himself, said Dmitri. Do you remember? I remembered. "And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hands until I have passed by: and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back: but my face shall not be seen."

We walked over to the small mosque not many yards away along the plateau. The whole space, apparently, was covered by the original chapel, and it is likely that part of the mosque, at least, was built from the ruin of the Christian

building about the same time as the mosque in the Convent was put up. But it seemed to me that some of the blocks in the Muslim foundation were so huge that they may have formed part of a far earlier pre-Christian shrine, an impression strengthened by the colossal monolith which stretches as a sort of lintel over the stairway leading down to the cave below, the very cave, it is said, in which Moses twice fasted forty days and forty nights.

"In that cave," said Dmitri dispassionately, "the Muslims say that the Prophet wrote out the Ten Commandments with his own hand." He was not going to concede without argument that anything so august could have happened in a cave above which the Muslims were going to build a shrine some two thousand years later.

"The Bible itself says that the Prophet wrote out the second Decalogue with his own hand," I pointed out. "The Lord Himself wrote it with His own hand the first time."

"That is true," Dmitri said doubtfully. "But it does not say in this cave."

That could not be argued one way or another.

"I have read a tale," I went on (for it seemed to me about time I came in with one of the tales of my own people), "I have read a tale which says that when Moses had finished writing the Ten Commandments, perhaps in this very cave, he wiped his pen on the hair of his head. And that is why the rays of light streamed from his head when he came down from the Mountain."

"That may also be true," said Dmitri. It was not a legend he had himself heard, and he was not going to commit himself to accepting it, before he had made further inquiries.

I looked again at the huge blocks under the wall and the monolith over the staircase. It seemed to me they went back a long way before Talmud and Koran and Bible. They belonged to some neolithic shrine millennia older than Moses himself. And if that is so, they accord ill with the Talmudic story that, out of all the world's mountains, Mount Sinai was



VIEW FROM THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

chosen to be the scene of the Law-giving, because it alone was free from all taint of heathendom.

Dmitri was not minded to let us spend much time examining the mosque, and there was not much to examine. It was quite empty, excepting for a jug and a coffee-pot in its window-niche. There were also a few votary rags and sprigs of rosemary stuck in crannies in the wall. The roof consisted of the usual palm trunks and reed matting.

Suddenly, from twenty yards away, we heard a glad shout. It did not seem like Dmitri's voice, or the voice of a monk at all. "Look what I have found! Come!" He stood at the door of a little rest-room the monks have put up under the Chapel. We went across. Some-one had left some dyed easter eggs. Some-one had left a few sprigs of the herbs with which the monks brew themselves a tisane. But it was a headier brew that excited Dmitri—a third of a bottle of cognac.

"It is a miracle!" said Dmitri. The miracle would have been even more gracious if the benefactor had remembered to put the cork back. Dmitri poured us out a few drops each as if the stuff were liquid gold.

"Is it not wonderful?" he asked, his eyes shining. We thought it good, but not so good as the crystal water that the Bedu brought up in a petrol-tin from some spring a little way down the mountain.

We sat down on the rock midway between the mosque and chapel and took out our loaves and figs and oranges and looked out towards the far horizon. As we ate, a little reddish-brown mouse appeared, well-fed, with comfortable eyes, and looked towards us steadily, and did not move away.

"No, no!" I heard a protesting voice beside me. "Oh no!" It was Jim's voice.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Not a mouse! It's not right! Not on the top of Mount Sinai!"

"It was all right in Elim," Lucas recalled. "But not here! Not on Sinai!"

We were all of a mind. "No, it's not suitable!" I agreed.

"What?" asked Dmitri. "You are talking about the mouse?" His eyes twinkled maliciously behind his spectacles.

"Yes."

"Did you notice? It was from under the mosque it came. Did you notice?"

I sighed a little wearily. I had not noticed.

The mountains. I turned my eyes to the mountains again. "It seems as if an ocean of lava," writes Disraeli, "when its waves were literally running mountains high, had been suddenly commanded to stand still. These successive summits, with their peaks and pinnacles, enclose a series of valleys, in general stern and savage, yet some of which are not devoid of pastoral beauty. There may be found brooks of silver brightness, and occasionally groves of palms and gardens of dates, while the neighbouring heights command sublime landscapes, the opposing mountains of Asia and Afric, and the blue bosom of two seas."

I recalled Disraeli's words as I looked round upon the mountains. What was lacking? It was like a note struck slightly flat on an instrument, like something seen through a window just slightly blurred. It was not the truth of those mountains. I will not make words, I told myself, regarding the view from Gebel Musa. What can a writer do, even a Disraeli, with a sublime view from a mountain-top, one of the sublimest views of its kind? He can do exactly that. He can call it sublime. Or majestic. Or divine. Each epithet valueless in itself, and all valueless in combination. Or he can take himself grimly in hand. He can eschew superlatives. He can divide into their elements the aggregation of landscapes. But what will that tabulation be worth?—here Ras Safsafch, three of its four peaks visible, here Gebel Tiniyeh, here the African ranges. Names, nothing more.

A charted photograph will do the work for him more efficiently. But a photograph does not give the colour—the sublime, the incomparable colour. You are at your superlatives again. Eschew superlatives. Divide into their elements the aggregation of colours. Privet-green rhombus of garden in valley, mauve patch of cloud-shadow on mountain-flank, red-hot-poker peaks. There is no way of not demeaning those colours when the attempt is made to translate them into words, for you can only compare them with things more meagre than themselves. Call in the painter, then? By the Lord, no! Call in no painter! And what painter would dare to paint?

Because words, written or oral, can give, and have given, no true account of such a view as that from Gebel Musa, I found it even more beautiful than I had anticipated, though heaven knows what standard of more beauty and less beauty you can set up in your mind. But as I looked about enchanted from horizon to horizon, I found the enchantment slowly invaded by a dark thought. I had been right in my apprehensions; formless in my phantasies of the night before, they had taken a more definite shape fifty yards below the summit, while Dmitri was telling me his tale of the monk Basil. *Would I ever reach the top of the Mountain? Was it the right Mountain, after all?*

I found I had got to the top of Gebel Musa, a grand mountain commanding grand views, but not to the top of Mount Sinai.

For the Holy Mountain is a spiritual, not a physical experience. Few men have ever reached the summit, and few will get there again. You may interpret how you choose the account of the supernal climate on the Mountain. "And Mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly." But the ascent is hopeless if neither behind nor before your

eyes the thunder crashes and the lightning flares. Perhaps it is only when the Mountain is veiled round with impenetrable cloud, that the Mountain begins to be visible at all.

§ 7

We were all three a little tired that evening; we did not linger over our supper, but went straight to bed. I think it likely that some-one mentioned it was Friday evening as we turned in. Or it may have been the half-inch of candle burning by my bedside that put the thought of the Friday-evening candles into my mind, the candles my mother used to light up for dinner in our Doomington kitchen years ago.

How brightly they gleamed, the samovar, the brass stool with its copper kettle, the brass tray with the silver beakers on! The table-cloth had a soft lustre like wax. I stretched my tired limbs out under the coverings, and raised my head from the pillow to blow out the candle.

But I let it fall again. It is forbidden on the Sabbath eve to blow out a candle. You must let it burn down to the socket. Besides, there was not one candle burning now, but six candles. I was not in bed now, but on my metal stool in the fender, close up against the oven. The dinner-things all cleared away, my mother sat in her corner of the horse-hair sofa, her small hands lying folded in her lap. My father sat at the table; behind him was the cupboard where the holy books were kept. He had a large dog-eared volume open before him.

“And so after many days,” my father was saying, “the time had come to go up from the plain under Mount Sinai, for the way was long yet, and the perils were manifold. And it came to pass, as it is written in the passage, that the tabernacle was reared up. For you must know it was in no wise possible”—he lifted his head for a moment from the book, keeping the place with his finger—“it was in no wise possible for the host to set forth without the rearing up of the taber-

nacle. And he took and put the testimony in the ark, and set up the veil of the screen, and screened the ark of the testimony; as the Lord had commanded him. And that being well done, and the laving and the anointing and all due ceremonies, he commanded the companies to set themselves in their order of marching. And because they were such a multitude, and because the place of the encampment where the companies took their order was so vast, being twelve thousand cubits on each side, he went up for the last time upon the Mountain, that he might look down upon it."

"The Mountain?" I cried, from the metal stool where I sat. "What is the name of that Mountain, father?"

"Hush! hush!" whispered my mother and my sisters faintly. A slight strain constricted the atmosphere. It was not considered seemly for anyone, least of all one of the younger members of the family, to let his voice be heard when my father was reading from the books, and expounding them.

But he was in no unamiable mood that evening. "Let him ask! What was it you were asking, son?"

"I was asking the name of that Mountain? The one which Moses climbed to look down on the companies."

"It is called Horeb, or Mount Sinai, the Holy Mountain. Why do you ask, son?"

"Because I have been there! I, too, have climbed it!"

The smile faded from his eyes. He looked at me in silence for twenty seconds, then turned his head slowly back toward his book.

My mouth quivered. The tears started in my eyes. "Perhaps I did not, father! Perhaps I did not!"

He made no comment. No-one made any comment. He took his handkerchief from the sleeve of his alpaca coat and dabbed his lips with it two or three times. Then he pulled the book towards him, and studied its crabbed lines for a minute or two, as if he were alone in the room. At length he spoke again.

"And the cloud covered the tent of the meeting, and the

glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of meeting, because the Lord abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

“And that is why,” explained my father, “Moses knew it was permitted him to go up on the Mountain.” He looked carefully, as he spoke, away from the corner of the room where I was sitting. “The tent was invisible in its glory, and Moses might not enter it. But all the companies were visible from high up on the Mountain there, grouped about their four standards, according to their four divisions, as the four archangels are grouped about the throne of the Lord; in front Gabriel, in the rear Raphael, to the left Uriel, to the right Michael. And in each of the four companies were three tribes, ranged as their ancestors, the twelve sons of Jacob, were ranged round their father’s bier. And the twelve tribes had each his own ensign, fluttering over the tents of their families. The Prophet’s eye kindled as he saw the wind take them, the blue flag of Judah, bearing the sign of the lion, for they were to be brave warriors; the black flag of Issachar, figured with the sun and moon, for they were to be astronomers, cunning in influences; the white flag of Zebulun, with a ship for token, for they were to be mariners, and carry gold for Solomon, and peacocks and ivory.

“So looking down upon the flags waving and the trumpets slung round the shoulders of the trumpeters and the swords girded upon the thighs of the warriors: ‘It is a good sight to see!’ sang the heart of Moses. And in that moment there was a movement in the cloud above the ark, and the sun came through and shone upon the swords and the trumpets.

“The time is fulfilled!” the Prophet said. And he came down the Mountain and went to the van of the companies. And in an hour, or in a day, the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, and the children of Israel went onward, through all their journeys.

“All their journeys . . .” my father repeated. He had lost the thread. He was getting drowsy. “All their



SINAI IN CLOUD

journeys . . ." he muttered into his beard. Then he found the thread again. "And in that cloud were the two letters, Yod and He, which together make up the most sacred of the Names. And as the cloud moved, the trumpeters blew their silver trumpets, the standards went forward; and the host went after the standards, and the four winds of heaven blew; and, as they blew, all the valleys were filled with the odours of myrrh and frankincense."

Slowly, one by one, the candles went out in the six brass candlesticks in the kitchen in Doomington. Then only one was left, in that tin candlestick in my high cold room in the Convent of Mount Sinai. Then that, too, went out.

SUEZ—LONDON—PARIS, 1937.

The tale of Moses is carried to the finale on Mount Pisgah in a book entitled : “In the Steps of Moses the Conqueror.”

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INDEX

AARON, 60, 101 *et seq.*, 118, 143, 220,
 221, 247, 268, 296, 299, 301,
 313, 333, 334
 anger of, at marriage of Moses
 with Cushite woman, 60
 does signs before Pharaoh, 102-104
 goes to Pharaoh, 102
 Hill of, 298
 makes Golden Calf, 299, 300
 rod of, alleged graft from, 288
Abu Sueir, village of, 124, 128, 129
Abu Zenima, 193, 194, 196, 208,
 211, 212, 215, 216, 218, 219,
 234
Abyssinia, 64
 legendary association of Moses
 with, 58, 59
Akaba, Gulf of, 92, 190
Al Azhar, Rector of, 12
 interview with, 22-23
Amalekites, battle of, with Israelites,
 246, 247, 259
Anta, Temple of, 77
Arab wedding procession, 124-125
Avaris, capital of Hyksos Kings, 63,
 64, 76
Ayun Musa, vii, 184, 185, 189, 190,
 209
 author at, 184 *et seq.*
 Marah probably identical with,
 182
Baal-Zephon, 141, 143, 144, 147,
 148
Balaam, chief magician of Pharaoh,
 50, 103
Beduin, 183-186, 197
 at Convent of Mount Sinai, 304
et seq.
 author's discussion with, on
 manna, 227-228
 casting of stones by, on rock at
 Wadi Feiran symbolic, 243
Beni Ezra, traditional place where
 Moses prayed for cessation
 of plague, 20

Bint-Anath, daughter of Rameses,
 47, 64
Bithiah. *See* Pharaoh's daughter.
Bitter Lakes, the, vii, 140, 144, 146,
 151, 190
Bodenheimer, Dr., establishes sub-
 stance of manna, 224, 230-
 231
Breidenbach, on manna, 224, 230
British Empire, Chief Rabbi of, 290
Buonaparte, Napoleon, letter from,
 286
Burckhardt, description of manna
 by, 225
Burning Bush, the, 93, 98-100, 135,
 138, 251, 254, 265, 284
 author sees apparition of, 99-100
 Basilica of, 280
 bush in Convent of Mount Sinai
 said to be grafted from, 92,
 288
Chapel of, 98-99
 endeavour to explain as natural
 phenomenon, 98-99
 possible parallel of, 99-100

Cairo, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17, 53, 261
 arrival in, 10
 Chief Rabbi of, 12
 Kasr en Nil bridge, 42
 manna on sale in, 224
 Museum, visit to, 23 *et seq.*
Camel Corps, the, 179, 182, 320,
 321
Camels, discussion as to travel by,
 172-173
Canaan, 138, 139
Canal de Mourys, 69, 82
Champollion, voyage on, 8
Codex Sinaiticus, 286-288
 alleged ruse to obtain, 21, 286-
 287
Archbishop of Mount Sinai's
 distress at losing custody of,
 20-21

Codex Sinaiticus, head of St. Catherine's Convent and, 286 *et seq.*

Porphyrios Ouspensky alleged finder of, 287

probably present from Emperor Justinian, 286

Tischendorff's account of obtaining of, 287

truth regarding possession by Kremlin of, 287

Commandments, Tables of, received by Moses, 293

broken by Moses, 297

Constantine, Emperor, 286

Copts, Orthodox, Patriarch of, 12

interview with, 18-19

Covenant, Book of the, 292, 295, 296

Crocodiles, Lake of. *See* Timsah, Lake.

Cush, probable Hebrew equivalent of Ethiopia, 60

Dammou, 14, 15, 17
See also Tammeou.

Danakil desert, 59

Decalogue, the, 292, 295, 296

Disraeli, Benjamin, on Sinai mountains, 340

Dufuriau, M., 213, 214
 extends hospitality to author, 204
et seq.

Egypt, 3
 Chief Rabbi of, interview with, 19-20
 countryside of, little changed from time of Moses, 44
 killing of first-born in, 109
 Joseph's body taken from, 121-122
 plagues in, 105 *et seq.*

Egyptians, drowning of, 148-149, 150
 gifts of, to Israelites before Exodus, 120-121

Egyptologists, Moses deemed mythical figure by, 4

El Aar, 210

El Arish, 156, 163

El Bueib, 263

El Khessuch, 248, 249, 250, 256

sheikh of, 248

El Kubri, 177, 178

El Markha, plain of, 218, 222, 223, 234
 traditionally identified with Wilderness of Sin, 222

El Shatt, 182

Eliezer, son of Moses, 260

Elim, vii, 181, 190, 191, 193, 194, 195, 197, 199, 210, 219, 234

cars bogged near, 195-196, 198
et seq., 340

Elliot-Smith, Sir G., 151
 and mummy of Menepah, 151

Etham, 131, 132, 134, 138, 139, 143, 245
 Ismailich and, identical, 133

Ethiopia, 58, 60
 "Cush" probable Hebrew equivalent of, 60

Ethiopian wife of Moses, 60
 anger of Miriam and Aaron at marriage to, 60

Et Tih, 183, 189, 246, 250

Exodus, book of, 63, 193, 214, 219, 234, 296

Exodus, the, 4, 5, 24, 59, 104-105, 140, 159, 221, 222
 probable scenes preceding, 120-121
 various estimates of number of Israelites participating in, 118-120

Exodus, On the Track of the, 162

Ezekiel, prophet, 63

Faqûs, village of, 68, 69, 82

Faruk, King, 171

First-born, Plague of, possible modern parallel to, 81

Fuad, King, 19

Gebel Ataka, 183

Gebel ed Deir, 268, 270, 324

Gebel Faraun, 189, 208, 210

Gebel Harun, 295, 301, 305

Gebel Katrin, 320, 321, 323, 329

Gebel Markha, 218

Gebel Moneidjeh, 268

Gebel Musa, viii, 159, 241, 255, 264, 289 *et seq.*, 296, 318 *et seq.*, 329

ascent of, 330 *et seq.*
See also Sinai, Mount.

Gebel Tahuneh, traditional mount where Moses upraised hands, 247

Gebel Tiniyeh, 340

Gershom, son of Moses, 260

Ghaffirs, 82, 83, 84, 85

Golden Calf, the, 268, 291, 301, 337
Aaron makes, 299, 300
anger of Moses at setting up of, 297
Moses destroys, 297
mould of head of, 289

Gordon, General, 59

Goshen, land of, 12, 86, 91, 92, 109, 113, 117, 118, 122, 123, 133
location of, 113-114
postcard showing, 146
probable birthplace of Moses, 36
variant names of, 114

Haj, Mohammedan pilgrimage, 8

Hammam Faraun, 208, 209

Hammersley, Major, 171

Hatton, Major, 170, 171

Hawwarah, 189, 190

Hazereth, camp of, 143

Heliopolis, 52, 53, 64
author at, 54-56
description of modern, 53

Plato at, 53
probable association of Moses with, 52, 57
remains of ancient, 56

Herodotus, 53, 124, 172

Holy Mountain. *See* Gebel Musa and Sinai, Mount.

Horeb, Mount, 91, 92

Human sacrifices, burial alive of, Asian and Semitic custom, 78

Hur, husband of Miriam, 247

Hyksos Kings, the, 63

Ibrahim, Egyptian motor-driver, 39, 40, 44, 53, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 72, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 115, 129, 132, 145, 152, 153, 155

Indicopleustes, Cosmas, on Israelites, 239

Ismailieh, 123, 124, 129, 130, 132, 133, 143, 146, 215
author in, 130-131, 140

Etham and, probably identical, 133, 140

Israelite children, buried alive by Egyptians, Talmud on, 78, 79

Israelites, the, 2, 79, 147
at Tent of Meeting, 221
battle of, with Amalekites, 246, 247, 259
complain against Moses, 147

Exodus of, various estimates of number participating in, 118-120

Indicopleustes on, 239

Jarvis, Major, former Governor of Sinai, 20, 244

Jerusalem, Patriarch of, letter from, 271

Jethro, 37, 91, 101, 138, 223, 259 *et seq.*, 262
and El Khidr, 266
characteristics of, 94
debt of Moses to, 95-96
first meeting of Moses and, 93-94
pride of, in Moses, 259
relations between Moses and, 94
Talmud on, 96
Well of Daughters of, 288

"Jim," author's companion on journey, 3, 8, 16, 17, 29, 31, 32, 33, 39, 86, 113, 126, 134, 145, 146, 151, 155, 169, 170, 172, 173, 180, 186, 193, 196, 197, 199, 200, 201, 205, 213, 214, 243, 255, 276, 295, 320, 323, 326, 329, 339

Joseph, 52
body of, taken from Egypt, 121-122
legend regarding, 144

Josephus, 64
Antiquities of the Jews by, 49, 50
on manna, 224
on Moses, 51, 57, 59, 60
on Pharaoh's daughter, 49, 50

Joshua, 293, 294, 295, 296

Justinian, Emperor, *Codex Sinaiticus* probably present from, 286

Ker, town of, 118

Koran, 264, 265
mention of Nebi Musa in, 22

Kremlin, the, truth regarding possession of Codex Sinaiticus by, 287

Libyan invasion, the, 105, 147

Lucas, author's companion on journey, viii, 3, 8, 14, 16, 17, 18, 29, 31, 32, 35, 39, 43, 70, 71, 91, 113, 115, 116, 126, 137, 143, 145, 146, 151, 153, 155, 160, 167, 169, 170, 171, 186, 192, 193, 196, 199, 201, 205, 213, 228, 243, 255, 260, 261, 276, 295, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 340

Makrizi, Arab writer, 15, 17

Manna, 221 *et seq.*, 241, 259
author's discussion with Beduin on, 227-228

author tastes, 231

Breidenbach on, 224, 230
description of, by Burckhardt, cited, 225
nature of, 223 *et seq.*

Niebuhr on, 225
not necessarily miraculous, 222
on sale in Cairo, 224
in South Shields, 224
possibly excretion of insect, 229, 230

various travellers on, 225

Manzala, Lake of, 68, 81, 140

Marah, vii, 181, 182, 184, 191, 210
author at, 184 *et seq.*

Ayun Musa probably identical with, 182
sweetening of waters at, 184

Matiariya, village of, 54-55
ancient tree at, 55
legendary halting-place of Virgin Mary, 54-55

Mecca, pilgrims to, 155-156

Memphis, 40, 41-42, 43, 48, 49, 52, 53, 58, 62, 64, 73
ancient, 45
temple of Ptah at, 46, 47

Meneptah, 78, 79, 111, 208, 209
meeting of Moses with, 101
Moses and Aaron perform signs before, 103 *et seq.*
mummy of, 151
incrustation of salt on, 151

Meneptah, Talmud on, 150-151
wickedness of, 97
See also Pharaoh.

Midian, land of, 90, 91, 92, 93, 136, 259
book of Exodus on, 192
modern doubt as to location of, 92
Moses flees to, 90
Moses in, 93, 97-98
possible ancient names for, 92

Migdol, 141, 142, 143, 144, 147

Miriam, 60, 87, 88, 167, 168
anger of, at marriage of Moses to Cushite woman, 60, 143
Arab legend regarding, 143
dislike of, for sister-in-law, 143

hillock of Gebel Maryam named after, 143
husband of, 247
song of, 149, 168

Mit Rahineh, village of, 45

Moab, land of, 6, 12, 247

Mohammed, alleged document of, 285

Mokatib, drawings in, 238, 241

Montagne de Marie. *See* Gebel Maryam.

Montet, Madame, 80
and Plagues of Moses, 80-81

Montet, Prof., 63, 77, 78, 79, 81, 97, 102
author and, 74 *et seq.*
researches of, 63

Moses, vii, 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 20, 40, 48, 52, 54, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 73, 75, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 92, 103, 105, 117, 118, 122, 136, 138, 147, 149, 181, 185, 188, 191, 210, 219, 220, 221, 223, 235, 236, 239, 240, 242, 245, 251, 252, 259, 262, 265, 269, 278, 279, 280, 281, 283, 284, 286, 288, 291 *et seq.*, 296, 328, 329

and Aaron, 101, 102
and Burning Bush, 98, 100
and Golden Calf, 268
and Jethro, 259 *et seq.*
and Pharaoh, 58, 102-104
anger of, at setting up of Golden Calf, 297
ascends mountain to talk with God, 293

Moses, burial-place of, 6
 probable birth-place of 36
 speculation regarding, 3-4, 5,
 6, 8
 chapel dedicated to, on Mount
 Sinai, 336
 description of, 336-337
 characteristics of, 58-59
 debt of, to Jethro, 95-96
 deemed mythical by certain
 Egyptologists, 4
 derivation of name, 48, 49
 destroys Golden Calf, 297
 divides Red Sea for Crossing, 149-
 150
 eikon of, 285
 Ethiopian wife of, 60
 Miriam's anger at marriage to,
 60
 finding of, by Pharaoh's daughter,
 4, 9, 11
 postcard depicting place of, 7,
 9, 10, 11, 12, 30, 32, 35
 Roda Island pointed out as
 place of, 35
 given mission by God, 98 *et seq.*
 sets out on, 101
 in Land of Midian, 93, 97-98
 Israelites complain against, 147
 Moses' reactions to, 147-148
 Josephus on, 51, 59
 legendary association of, with
 Abyssinia, 58, 59
 legendary beauty of, 58
 meaning of name of, 58
 meeting of, with Zipporah, 93
 obtains water by striking rock,
 242
 possible natural explanation of,
 244-245
 orders sons of Levi to slay idolatrous
 Israelites, 298
 other men bearing name of, 252
 performs signs before Pharaoh,
 102 *et seq.*
 Philo on, 51-52
 probably educated at Heliopolis,
 52, 57
 receives Tables with Command-
 ments, 293
 regarded as water-diviner, 244
 relations between Jethro and,
 94

Moses, smashes Tables of Com-
 mandments, 297
 smites the Egyptian, 86, 88, 89
 emotions engendered in, by, 67,
 89, 90
 sons of, 260
 stratagem of, 59
 Talmud on, 50-51, 97
 upraises hands at battle against
 Amalekites, 247
Zohar on, 5
 Mustapha, Corporal of Camel
 Corps, 175, 176, 177, 178,
 179, 180, 181, 183, 186, 190,
 192, 194, 196, 197, 198, 199,
 200, 202, 214, 227, 228, 243,
 248, 254, 276, 321, 322
 Naville, 126
 Nebi Musa, 14, 15, 17, 243, 244,
 262, 268, 305
 mention of, in Koran, 22
 Nebi Saleh, 263, 264, 267
 hill of, 268
 tomb of, 264-266
 Nebo, Mount, 290
 Nesib, Prof., 19-16, 17, 39, 40, 53
 Niebuhr on manna, 225
 Nile, the, 3, 4, 66
 herons on, 66
 the Red, 106
 scenes on, 66-67
 Om Khanan, village of, 14
 Ouspensky, Porphyrios, alleged to
 be discoverer of Codex
 Sinaiticus, 287
 Pappenheim, Dr., interview with,
 24 *et seq.*
 Paran, desert of, 59
 Passover, the, 109
 Pharan, ruins of, 251 *et seq.*
 seat of bishopric, 252
 town of, 240, 241, 249, 251
 Pharaoh, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 14, 24-26,
 37, 38, 41, 58, 79, 147
 doubt as to which Moses lived
 under, 4
 Moses confronts, 102
 Moses does signs before, 102 *et seq.*
See also Menephtah, and Rameses the
 Second.

Pharaoh's daughter, 50, 51
 finding of Moses by, 4, 9, 11
 Josephus on, 49, 50
 parentage of, 41, 48
 Talmud on, 50

Pharaon, 128, 129

Philo, *Life of Moses* by, 50, 51

Pi-hahiroth, 139, 140, 141, 143, 144, 147
 theories as to location of, 141-142

Pillar of Fire, possible natural explanation of, 135-138

Pi-Rameses, 64, 75, 77, 79.
See also Tanis.

Pithom, 123, 124, 126, 127
 probable identification of, with Succoth, 123, 124

Plato at Heliopolis, 53

Potiphar, 11

Promised Land, the, 2

Ptah, Temple of, at Memphis, 46, 47

Ptolemy, 92

Pyramids, the, 162

Quails, 221, 241
 appearance of, not necessarily miraculous, 222, 223

Ra, Sun-God, 52

Raamses, city of, 63, 124, 150, 151

Rameses the Second, 25, 41, 42, 47, 49, 52, 62, 63, 73, 75, 77, 79, 80, 90, 116, 117, 127, 280

Asian characteristics of, 64
 mummy of, discovery of, 97

Pharaoh of the Oppression, 42, 75
 statue of, 46

trouble of, with border territories, 58

Ras Safsafeh, 295, 296, 301, 302, 340

Red Sea, the, vii, 3, 189, 193, 219
 author camps by, 211-212
 crossing of, 2, 135, 139-141, 143, 148-149, 156, 178, 182, 189
 postcard showing place of, 146
 reported trouble at, 149-150
 speculation as to place of, 182, 189-190

Talmud on, 150

Rephidim, 223, 226, 234, 241, 242, 260
 battle at, 246

Roda Island, 31, 35, 146
 pointed out as place where baby Moses was found, 35

Saba, city of, 60

Saft-el-Henna, village of, 114, 115, 116

San el Hagar, 69, 70, 72, 77, 81
 Egyptian name for Field of Zoan, 65

Sanhedrin, the, 57

Sayce, Prof., 263

Sekhet Tcha (Tchant), 62, 63, 76
See also Tanis.

Serabit el Kadem, 234, 235, 236

Serapeum, ruins of, 144

Serbal, Mount, 241, 250

Seti the First, 63

Sheikh presents ring to author, 257-258

Shur, wilderness of, 178, 182, 189

Sin, wilderness of, 59, 214, 217, 218, 220, 226, 234, 242
 characteristics of, 218-219
 children of Israel in, 220-221
 traditionally identified with Plain of El Markha, 222

Sinai, 215, 247, 260
 Archbishop of Convent of, 4, 12, 270
 and Codex Sinaiticus, 20-21
 interview with, 20-21

Convent of, 12, 92, 229, 270 *et seq.*, 326, 327, 331 *et seq.*, 345
 life in, 302 *et seq.*
 monks of, 302
 wedding in, 327 *et seq.*
 well in, pointed out as associated with Moses, 92

desert of, 59, 290

Mount, viii, 1, 136, 159, 160, 181, 190, 222, 236, 254, 259, 263, 267, 281, 290, 324, 325, 334, 343
 author ascends, 330 *et seq.*
 chapel dedicated to Moses on, 336
 observatory in, 323 *et seq.*
 Ras Safsafeh bastion of, 267

Smith, Colonel, vii, viii, ix, 157
et seq., 177

Stephen, St., 57

Succoth, 113, 121, 123, 126, 130,
 131, 134
 Feast of, 123
 probable identification of, with
 Pithom, 123, 124

Suez, 154
 author in, 155 *et seq.*
 Bel Air Hotel in, vii, 155, 173
 Canal, vii, 123, 133, 140
 Circus in, 164 *et seq.*
 Gulf of, 140

Talmud, the, 2, 50, 97, 138, 149,
 299
 extracts from, 37-38, 78-79
 Israelite children, burial alive of,
 described in, 78-79
 on Crossing of Red Sea, 150
 on Jethro, 96
 on manna, 229
 on Moses, 57, 88, 97, 101, 139
 on plague of flies, 107
 on water flowing from rock, 245
 on water turned to blood, 106

Tammeou, village of, 14, 17, 40

Tanis, city of, 62, 63, 69, 70, 72, 73,
 78 *et seq.*, 91
 excavations at, 77
 human remains found at, 78
 present appearance of, 72-74
 Raamses identical with, 63, 75

Tel el Maskhuta, 123, 124, 126
 description of, 126-127

Tel el Kebir, 122

Tent of Meeting, assembly of Israelites at, 221

Tharbis, probable name of Ethiopian wife of Moses, 60, 61

Thebes, 73, 97
 association of Rameses with, 58

Timsah, Lake, vii, 133, 140, 141,
 142, 144, 159

Tischendorff, 286, 288
 alleged ruse of, to obtain Codex
 Sinaiticus, 21

own account of how he obtained
 Codex Sinaiticus, 287

Tombs, Valley of, 1

Torah, 290, 293

Wadi Aleyut, 250

Wadi ed Deir, 295, 302
 Convent of St. Catherine in, 268,
 270 *et seq.*
 Beduin of, characteristics of,
 304
 life in, 302 *et seq.*

Wadi Feiran, 223, 226, 230, 236,
 240, 241, 242, 244, 247, 248
 oasis of, 251, 255, 258
 convent annexe at, 255 *et seq.*

rock at, pointed out as one Moses
 struck, 242
 casting of stones on, by Beduin
 symbolic, 243

Wadi Gharandel, viii, 190, 192, 204,
 205, 207, 208, 215, 219

Wadi el Hassa, 59

Wadi Ledja, 321, 322
 reputed place where Moses destroyed Golden Calf, 297

Wadi Mina, 244

Wadi Mojib, 59

Wadi Mokatteb, 223, 236, 240

Wadi Shebeikah, 211

Wadi es Sheikh, 223, 263, 267, 270

Wadi Sidre, 233, 236

Wadi Solaf, 263

Wadi Tayibeh, 211

Wadi Tumilat, vii, 115, 122, 159

Zagazig, 65, 68, 70, 81, 82, 85, 101,
 109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 123

Zipporah, 262, 288, 328, 329
 first meeting of Moses with, 93-94
 legend regarding, 101
 rejoins Moses, 260

Zoan:
 another name for Tanis, 64
 Biblical rendering of Sekhet
 Tcha (Tchant), 62
 Field of, 62, 65, 80, 86, 88, 90, 91,
 92, 101, 104, 109
 Egyptian name for, 65

Zohar, on Moses, 5

